A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE!

STARTLING STORIES

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FEATURING

THE GODS HATE KANSAS

A Long Book-Length Novel

By JOSEPH J. MILLARD

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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A true experience of BALLARD DEAN, *Kirkland, Washington*

"THE THING sprang out of the earth one bitterly cold evening as I was returning to camp after an all-day deer hunt," writes Mr. Dean. "I suffered excruciating agony, as it bit into my leg. It was a bear trap, illegally set for deer.

"FRANTICALLY, I TRIED TO GET LOOSE as the cold knifed through my clothing. With sinking heart, I found my struggles of no avail. In a few hours, if help could not be summoned, I would freeze to death. Darkness came on as I fought hopelessly with the strong steel jaws.

"THEN I THOUGHT OF MY FLASHLIGHT. There was a chance that other returning hunters might be in the woods. Flashing the bright beam off and on, my efforts were finally rewarded. Thanks to those 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, two men saw my signal and rescued me from that death trap.

(*Signed*) *Ballard Dean*"

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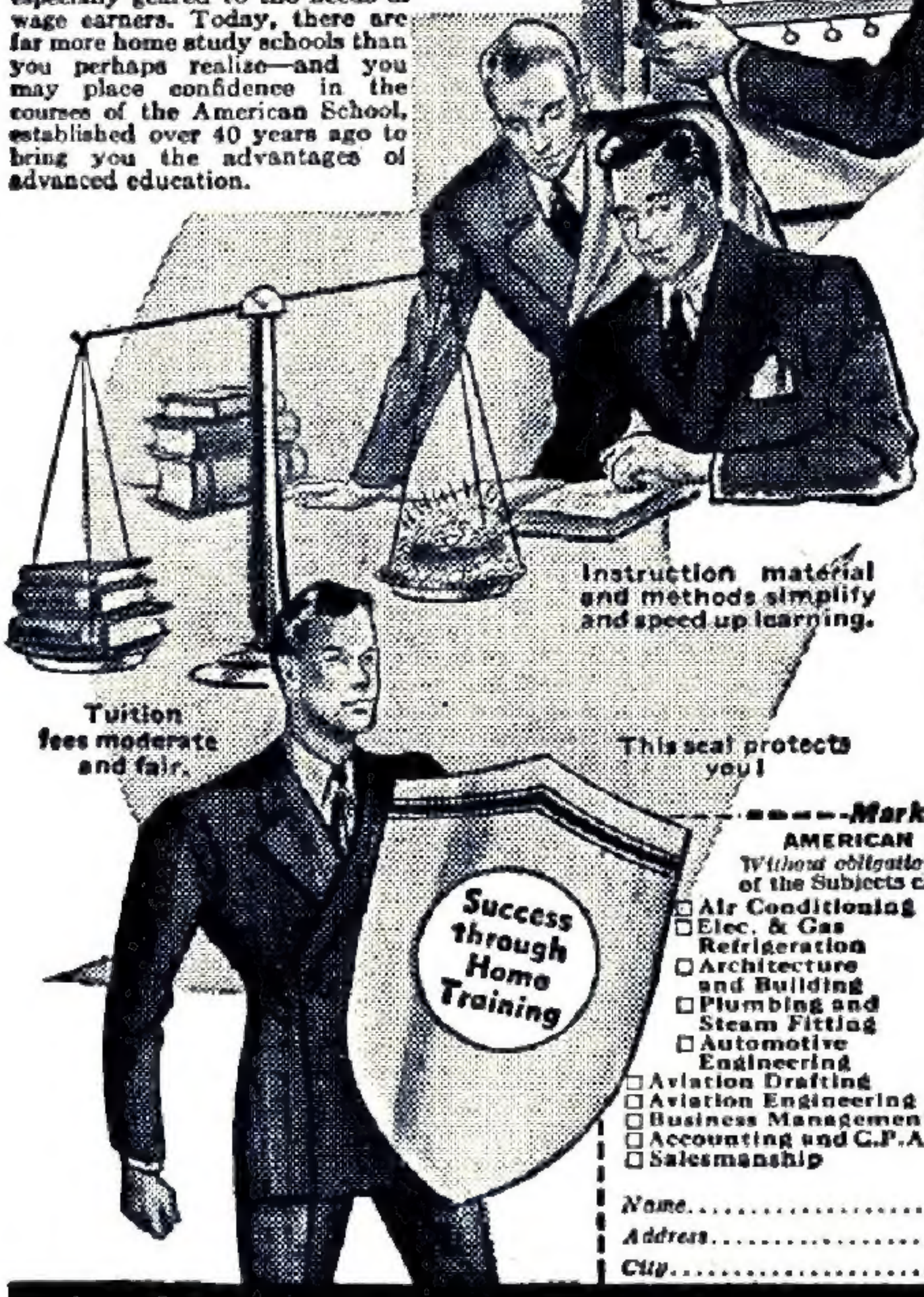
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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 6, No. 3 — CONTENTS — November, 1941

A Complete Book-Length Scientifiction Novel

THE GODS HATE KANSAS

By JOSEPH J. MILLARD

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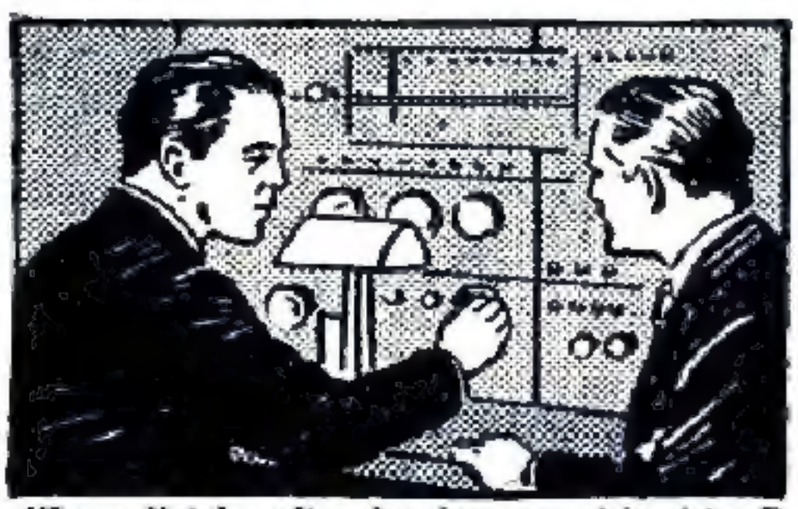
A True Story By J. C. V.
(Name and Address Sent on request)

"I had a low-pay, no future job as a store clerk. I was not satisfied, but read about the opportunities in Radio and how N. R. I. would train me at home for them. I enrolled right away."

"The Course National Radio Institute gave me was so practical that I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"After graduating I got a job as Radio Operator aboard ship, and was able to travel and see many parts of the world with all expenses paid, and a good salary besides."



"Immediately after leaving my ship job, I was made Chief Engineer of a small broadcasting station. Later I held the same job with several other similar stations in the South."

"I'm now Chief Engineer of WDOD, Chattanooga, Tenn. I make $1,800 a year more than when I started Radio. There are many opportunities for trained Radio Technicians today."

BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

I Will Train You at Home In Spare Time

Many fellows who want better jobs are going to read these words—and do nothing about them. But a few, like J. C. V., who are MEN OF ACTION are going to say "SHOW ME HOW TO BE A SUCCESS IN RADIO!" The rest of my story is for these men. The "do-nothings" can stop here.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is one of the country's busiest industries today. On top of a record demand for Radio sets and equipment for civilian use, the Radio industry is getting millions of dollars in defense orders. The 882 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are 50,197,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained.

Beginners Quickly Learn to Earn $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio

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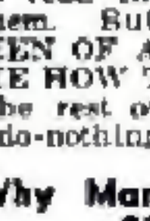
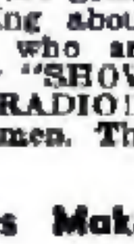
J. E. SMITH, President,
Dept. IMO9, National Radio Institute,
Washington, D. C.



EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, TOO



Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times a private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. **IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!**

GOOD FOR *Free* 64-PAGE BOOK

Mr. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1MO9,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Send me the FREE 64-page book which helped J. C. V. jump his pay $35 a week. I want to know about Radio's opportunities. (No salesman will call—write plainly.)

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Plays on Radio. I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course. *W. H. S., Alabama.

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Actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be, I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that there's not even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

I Was a 97-lb. Weakling

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is "Dynamic Tension," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

What 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

Forty years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made $10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field inwhich to make his start and develophis future.

Not a "Gadget"— Not a "Knick-Knack"—

but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greater part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.85 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two-thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the larger firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. *If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded*—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—*that is a necessity* but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—*that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time*—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, *get in touch with us at once* for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, *use the coupon below*—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. *Address*

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Why Trained Accountants Command High Salaries

—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the La Salle Problem Method

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. He became auditor for a large bank with an income 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at $30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income several times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning $200 a month—moved up quickly to $3000, to $5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which netted around $10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you may equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

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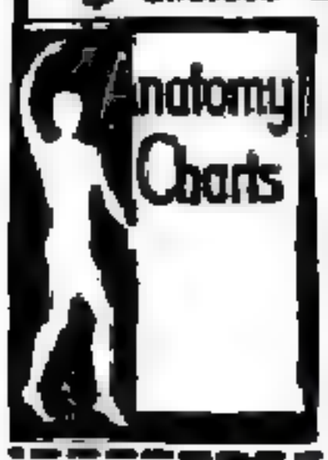

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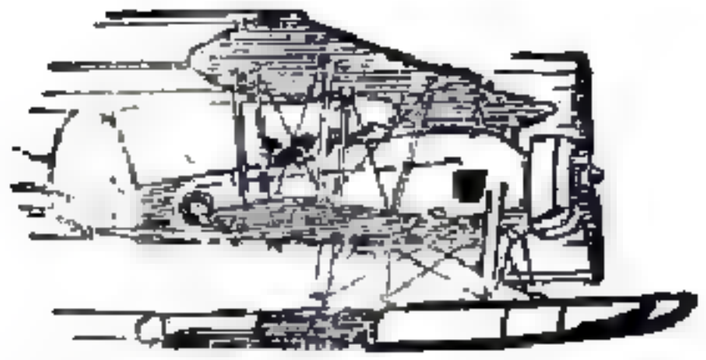

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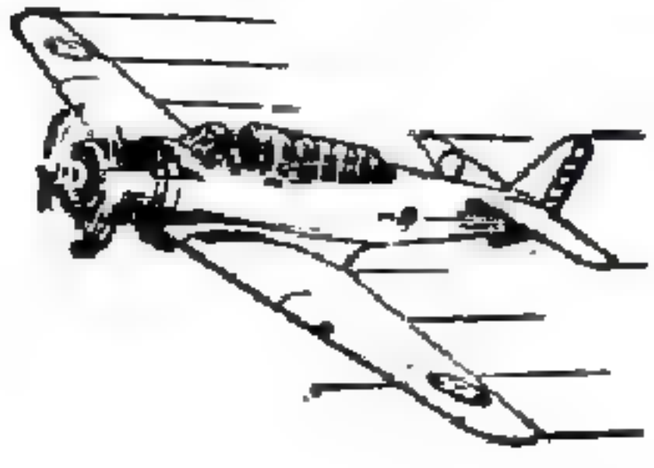

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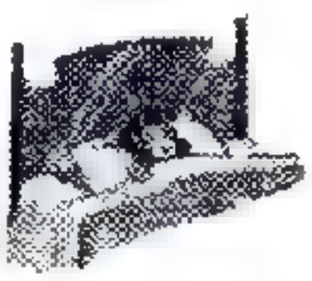

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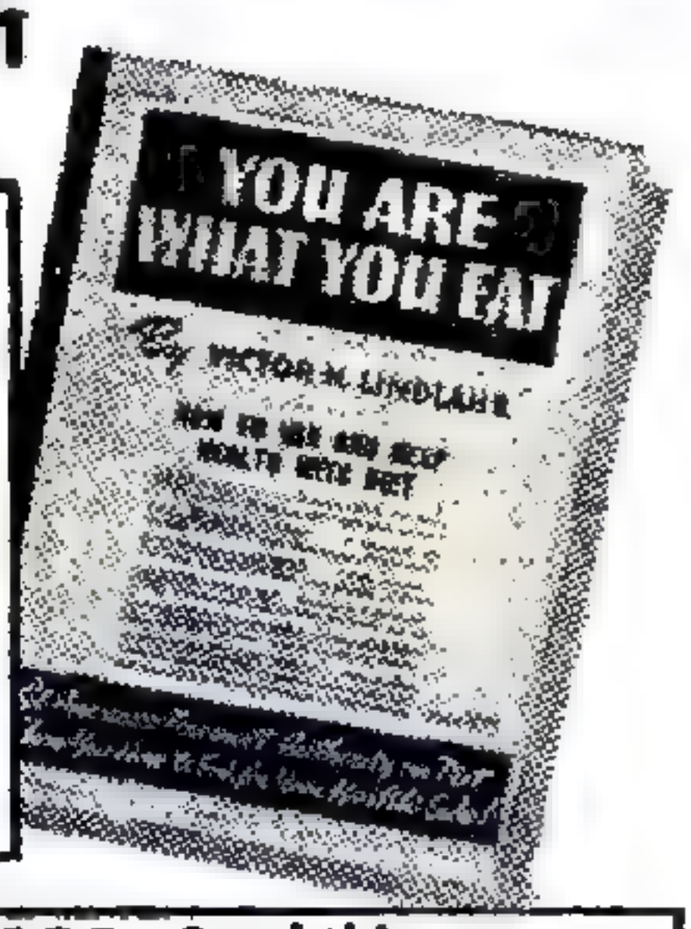

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By JOSEPH J. MILLARD

Author of "The Crystal Invaders," "Crash on Viar," etc.

CHAPTER I

Rocks from the Sky

THE rocks had been hurtling toward earth for more than a week, silent and invisible in the black airless void of space. There was something dogged in the way the eleven dark chunks of stone clustered together, neither drawing apart nor touching, maintaining always that odd arrowhead formation as the tens of thousands of trackless miles whipped by.

And there was something vaguely sinister in their majestic progress, moving an unvarying nineteen miles a second, ignoring the billions of fragments of meteoric dust that fled past them at vastly greater speeds. They were somehow like messengers dispatched upon some dark mission, their progress timed to carry them to an infinitely distant rendezvous at exactly the appointed time.

The rocks were very close to earth,

THE GODS HATE KANSAS

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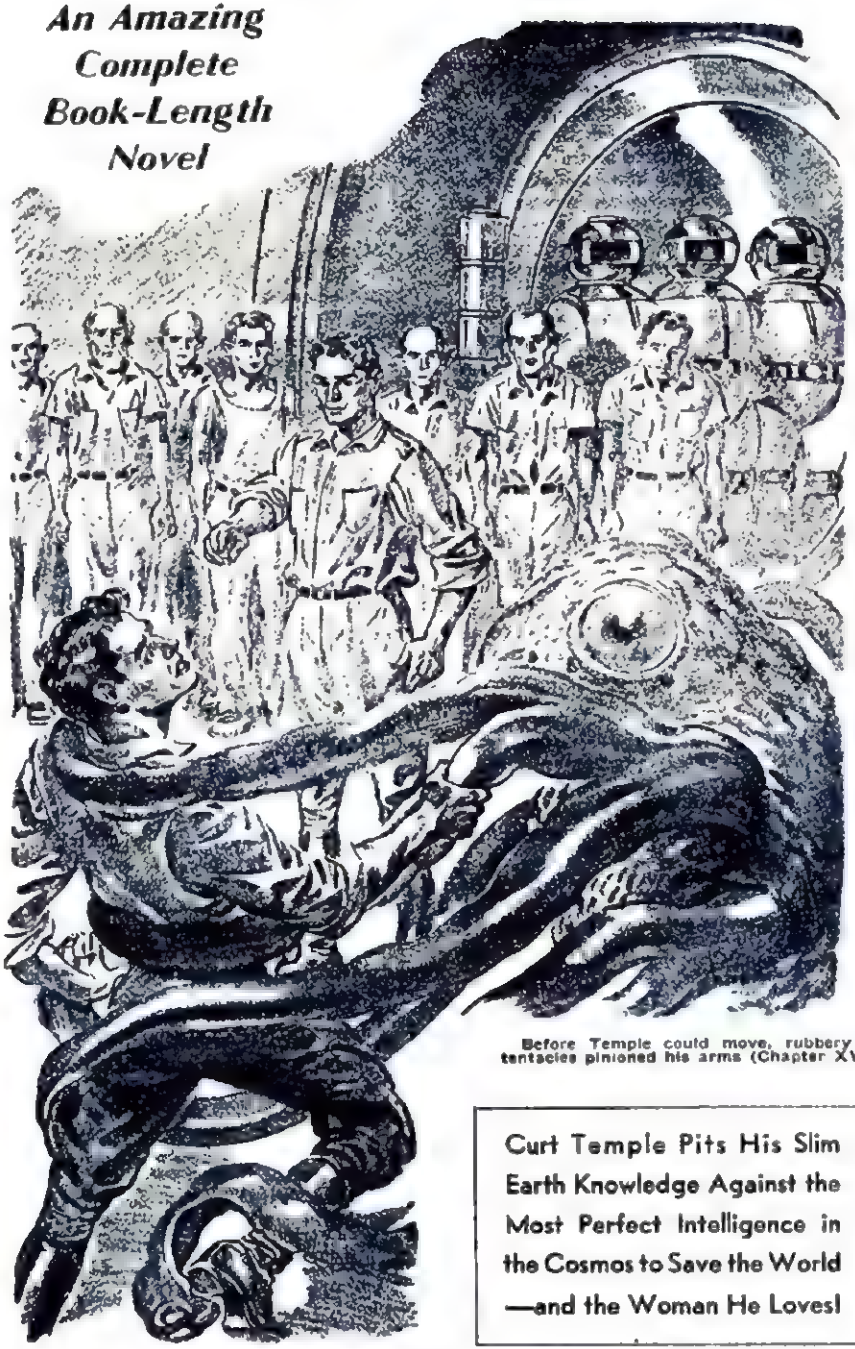

Before Temple could move, rubbery tentacles pinioned his arms (Chapter XV)

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still invisible but feeling the first gentle tug of earth's gravitation, when Gus Solle finished his night's chores. He stripped the last ounce of milk into the brimming pail, hung the milk-stool on a peg and got down the oil lantern from its hook above the cow stalls.

At the barn door he paused, waiting for two other flickering lanterns to join him.

Young Gus, his twenty-year-old son, came striding from the dark shadows of the horse barn at the rear, slapping loose straw from his overalls. Arnie Cole, the hired man, pumped a last groaning gush of water into the stock tank, picked up his own lantern and joined them as they moved toward the house.

"Supper's ready!" The gaunt figure of Martha Solle appeared in the doorway of the house to make the announcement, her big frame silhouetted by the kerosene lamp on a table at her back.

"Set the milk in the shanty and separate it afterwards. It'll keep but supper won't."

Gus Solle grunted acknowledgment as the three moved up the barren ground toward the frame house.

"If you figure on workin' old Mag tomorrow, pa," young Gus remarked, "you better throw a pad under her collar. She's got a bad gall from the hame strap."

"Ain't much sense in working any of the horses," Arnie Cole growled, "unless we get some rain purty soon. The more I see of Kansas the more I wish I'd never left Iowa."

"We could use a drop or two," Gus Solle admitted. "Don't seem to be a cloud in sight, neither. I like the stars but I'm getting mighty sick of seein' 'em night after night when the land's burning up for a good rain."

HE squinted up at the unbelievably brilliant panorama of the cloudless night sky with anger in his mild face. Unconsciously, the other two turned their faces up toward the heavens to follow his gaze and his wife, waiting in the doorway, looked up to see what the men-folk were staring at.

Thus it happened that four pairs of eyes saw the rocks at the precise instant when, some eighty-seven miles up into the night, they first flamed to brilliance in the clutch of tenuous atmosphere.

"Look," Martha Solle cried. "Shootin' stars—a whole tribe of 'em, looks like."

"Meteors, ma," young Gus corrected with the superiority of one who had been to school in town. "A meteor swarm."

There was no more time for speech. What had been only a leisurely glide through outer space became, in relation to earth speeds, a screaming flight. In two seconds, the eleven separate bodies of rock could be plainly resolved by the naked eye, and the thin scream of their coming had reached ahead to torment the ears.

In three seconds, the eleven rocks had leaped beyond the apparent size of baseballs and their brilliance was incredibly dazzling. Now the scream had deepened to a rushing roar, interspersed by thunderous explosions as two of the eleven rocks succumbed to the titanic forces of kinetic energy and burst apart in midair.

In four seconds, the sound of their passage was beyond description. The Solles and Arnie Cole stood frozen as nine flaming rocks, now bigger than basketballs, seemed to hurtle straight toward their defenseless house. All saw the largest rock in front, with the eight others arrowed out in two streams behind, sweeping down in a vast arc.

Then, miraculously, the rocks were overhead, passing above them and above the low house, sweeping on in a screaming thunder of awful sound to plunge into the dusty wheat field beyond. Air, searing hot and violently churning, smote their upturned faces, scorching the breath from their lungs.

The nine rocks struck and vanished in a welter of flame and mushrooming dust. The sound became something too terrible for human ears to measure. The ground underfoot rocked to the impact and a fresh wave of super-heated air surged out from the point of contact and swept the four stunned humans from their feet.

Then silence fell, a silence that was

broken only by the faint patter of infinitesimal particles of exploded rocks against house and earth.

"Martha!" it was Gus Solle, first to recover his senses and clamber onto shaky legs. "Martha, are you all right?"

They all moved, then, climbing dazedly to their feet, mumbling assurances.

"Come on," young Gus cried shrilly, his own voice sounding faint against shattered eardrums, "they landed right there on the edge of the north forty. I'm going over there."

"Wait! Be careful!" Martha Solle warned. "One of them things might explode. I wouldn't go near if I was you."

"Heck with that noise!" young Gus cried excitedly. "I'm gonna find 'em and dig 'em all out. Them things are worth money. Pete Halvorsen found just a little chunk of an old meteor on his place a couple years ago and some guys from Washington give him fifty dollars for it. I bet there's a couple hundred dollars' worth, at least, right there waiting for us. Come on!"

They all went, then, running and stumbling across the parched earth toward the fresh scars that lay plain under the starlight. The thought of money drove all fear from their minds.

In the wheat field, the things lay quietly in their shallow pits—waiting!

CHAPTER II

Lost Expedition

THE spring sunlight lay warm on the fresh green of Culwain University campus. Curtis Temple felt the tingle of it through the narrow bandage on the back of his head and made a mental note to spend as much time as possible with his head exposed to that radiance. It would speed the healing of his wound.

He went across the campus, a tall well-knit young man in rough tweeds with a pleasantly-angular face and level gray eyes. There was still a glow of deep bronze on his skin, despite the traces of hospital pallor, and his rangy stride was definitely a product of open spaces. It was hard to believe that this athlete could be Curtis Temple, Ph.D., professor of Astrophysics at Culwain and rated among the tops in that vast new field of scientific adventure.

It was adventure that had drawn Temple to this phase of universal research, the thrill of searching unknown spaces, of charting the uncharted, seeing the unseen, fitting the complexities of the infinite into a laboratory pattern. And it was love of adventure that had sent him soaring skyward in a free balloon on the ill-fated cosmic ray search that had nearly cost him his life.

The failure of the balloon had left him with a shattered skull that confined him to the hospital for weary months. It was only now that, thanks to medical genius, he was out and able to walk and work and feel the warmth of the sunlight on his bared head.

He went into the shadowy interior of the astronomical observatory, crouching under its silvery dome on a corner of the campus, and entered the laboratory. Mullane, the weazened little gnome of an astronomer, was in there, absorbed in a delicate radiation experiment. He was unaware of Temple's entrance until the needle on a dial before him began to dip and flicker madly.

Mullane laid down his pencil with a mock sigh of despair and snapped off the switch.

"Don't look now," he whispered loudly, addressing the bare wall, "but that man's here again—the one with the tin head."

Temple chuckled and strolled over to kibitz at Mullane's notes. The two were old friends and associates.

"It's lucky for you I'd just finished," Mullane growled, grinning with his eyes. "Every time that silvery skull of yours gets near the coils, my indicators run wild.

"I think I ought to tell the F.B.I. about it. How is your head, and how much longer do you have to wear that silver plate screwed to your skull bone, Curt?"

"Not long, and it really isn't a plate. It's a sort of fine-mesh silver screen that Doc put in to hold the broken pieces of my skull in place until they knit.

"I'm actually as good as new right now but Doc wants to leave the silver in for another few weeks. I don't mind. The scar is almost healed, and I never feel the screen anymore."

"Too bad you weren't able to go with the field group the University sent down to Kansas to study that meteorite swarm. Meteors are your specialty, Curt, and it isn't once in a century that a big fall like that occurs before wit-

nesses so it can be located and studied while still fresh. Even if nebulae are my specialty, I'd like to have gone there, myself."

Temple's face clouded momentarily.

"Missing that did hurt," he admitted, "but somebody had to carry on the classes here and I'm still technically a cripple.

"I can't really kick, though. I'm getting photos, samples and complete reports every day and it's my own line of study the Group is following. After all, Lee is there—and she's my eyes and ears on the expedition."

Mullane grinned and winked broadly.

"And your heart, too?" he asked slyly.

Temple reddened and then laughed.

"Okay, granny snoop, my heart, too. So what? With all the prying you do into my affairs, it's a wonder you ever get a moment off to look through your telescope."

"I don't," Mullane admitted placidly. "I leave that job to the camera and keep my eyes on you. Tch! Tch! How scandalous.

"Seriously though, Curt, Lee Mason is every bit as intelligent as she is beautiful—and that's going some. Why, that master's thesis she did on the oscillatory determinative of extra-galactic cathodic emissions was a wonder.

"But I'm warning you, if you marry her you lose the finest assistant any research man ever had. Why, that girl—"

He broke off as the telephone whirred, answered the call and then handed over the instrument.

"For you, Curt. Our prexie himself calling, no less."

Wondering, Temple accepted the phone. The usually precise accents of McCabe, Culwain U's president, were ragged.

"Professor Temple, I—I think you'd better get over to my office right away. Something .has occurred—something that—well, it concerns our Kansas expedition."

The cold fingers of a nameless fear tightened suddenly around Curtis Temple's heart.

"Our field group! What about them? What's hap—"

"The field group," McCabe said thickly, "has disappeared—vanished with all their luggage and equipment."

"Disappeared? Lee—Miss Mason—what about her?"

McCabe's answer was like a phonograph with its needle stuck in one groove.

"The field group," even his tone was the same, "has disappeared—vanished with all their luggage—"

PRESIDENT McCABE'S face was as white as his beard, his eyes red-veined and dazed, when Temple burst into his office five minutes later.

"What do you mean—*disappeared?*" Temple shouted, before the other could speak. "People don't just disappear off the face of the earth. What happened to them? Where did they go? Are you hiding someth—"

McCabe waved a trembling hand toward a chair and hunched over the desk, gnawing at his beard.

"Of course people don't disappear," he said finally. "But they did—nine persons, five heavy trucks, tons of instruments and supplies, tools and equipment and the six portable shacks.

"Last night, when I talked to them by phone, everything was going perfectly. When I called back this morning to give them some data they requested, there was nothing left but the marks where camp had been—and the meteors."

"The *meteors!*" Temple gasped. "You mean they went off and left the—the very object of their trip?"

"They left several tons of distinctly *un*portable rock," McCabe admitted. "But I'm afraid they didn't just 'go off and leave them' in the sense you mean."

"The sheriff and fifty deputies have been scouring the country since morning without finding a wheel track or a trace of them. Nor have they found anyone who saw or heard the caravan pass in the night, though every road out of camp led through towns."

"But—but they must have gone *somewhere.*"

"Obviously," McCabe agreed dryly. "The puzzle is where and how. And I might add a third element of mystery—why?"

Curtis Temple stared, feeling the blood drain out of his face. He was

just beginning fully to realize the sheer impossibility of what had been told him.

He knew the layout of the meteor camp as well as he knew the paths across Culwain campus, for most of it was of his own design. Five of the shacks were small, square sheet iron affairs, sleeping quarters for the force. Lee Mason occupied one alone.

The eight men shared the other four. The sixth shack was really two shacks built together, housing the photographic darkroom, the chemistry lab, the instruments for physical analysis and cubbyholes in which the researchers performed their calculations.

These shacks and all they contained were built to be carried on four trucks. The fifth truck bore the portable generating unit for camp light and power, the kitchen equipment and rough tools. Usually a day and a half were required to break camp and pack for moving.

WHILE it was conceivable that the nine members could completely dismantle and pack the camp overnight, it would take some inhuman driving urge to make the miracle possible. Curtis Temple's imagination tried to supply a suggestion of what such driving urge might be and failed utterly to conjure up anything but a black cloud of unnameable terror.

"The—the neighbors," he gasped at last. "Someone must have seen or heard something. Someone *must* have."

"Maybe someone did. The only ones closer than the town of Bomer, two miles away, were those farmers who saw the meteors fall and reported to us. There was a man and his wife, their grown son, and a hired man.

"Our camp was on their land, about a hundred yards from their house, right on the site of the meteor pits. The two Solles and their hired man were helping the field crew on heavy work and Mrs. Solle was cooking for the camp."

"They must know what happened," Temple said eagerly.

"Perhaps they do," McCabe whispered without looking up. "Undoubtedly they do. But they've vanished, too—all four of them—the same time, the same way."

Temple closed his eyes, seeing a vision of Lee Mason's lovely face with its frame of wheat-gold hair, hearing again the gay tinkle of her ready laughter and the soft music of her voice. The vision was like a knife turning around and around in his heart.

"Either," McCabe gritted, tightening his fists, "it's a gigantic hoax of some kind, or—"

"Or," Temple finished flatly, "the gods still hate Kansas."

"Eh?" McCabe stared blankly.

"You've heard my remark that the gods must hate Kansas because they throw so many stones at it. You were in class the day I used that expression.

"Maybe it sounded facetious, but it wasn't meant to be because behind it lies a mystery that has puzzled me and every other astronomer for years—a mystery that rivals any puzzle science ever unearthed."

"I—I don't think I follow you, sir."

"Look," Temple leaned forward earnestly. "You know there are roughly, two kinds of meteorites—stone and iron. Some twenty million of them enter the earth's atmosphere every twenty-four hours, although few of them reach the earth without being consumed by friction with air.

"We think we know what meteors are—cosmic dust, the wreckage of shattered planets or comets burst apart in space. We think space is full of these fragments, that we're constantly meeting them, burning them up in our upper atmosphere or letting an occasional large one get through to earth.

"That sounds logical, but is it? If that were the true answer, then by all the laws of probability the meteors that do fall should be pretty evenly distributed over the face of the earth, shouldn't they?"

"Of course," McCabe admitted dazedly. "But I don't see—"

"They should be," Temple drilled on. "But they aren't. The United States is struck by almost as many meteorites as all the rest of the world put together. But the real mystery lies in stoney meteorites, like the swarm that just struck in Kansas. *Why* did they land in Kansas?"

"Why—why, I suppose they just ***happened*** to."

"Did they? Listen! Kansas isn't a very big state, but a third of all stone meteorites ever known to strike in North America landed in little Kansas. One-sixth of all the stones recorded on earth struck Kansas.

"More stone meteorites land in Kansas than in any other state in the union —more than in any other *two* states west of the Mississippi. The largest stone meteorite ever known landed there. The largest of the rare Pallasite stones, as well, struck Kansas.

"But that isn't all. Scott County, Kansas, is the only place on earth where meteors ever struck twice in the same place. More meteoric falls have been actually witnessed in Kansas than anywhere else on earth. Two of the thirteen rarest meteor types known in North America were found within the borders of Kansas."

"Why," McCabe gasped feebly, "that's utterly fantastic."

"You bet it is—but it's brutal fact. Ask Mullane, Dawson, any astronomer, or read Nininger's book on meteorites for a complete dated record of known falls.

"It's fantastic, but it's been happening for centuries, *and there must be a reason!* The disappearance of the meteor expedition is fantastic, too, but again there's got to be a reason.

"The landing of nine huge stony meteorites, travelling in a perfect V-formation is fantastic. And that isn't all. The expedition has been measuring the impact pits, scurrying around to cross-examine witnesses to the fall, getting a complete picture of the direction and velocity of the swarm. I've just finished assembling their data and the results are even more fantastic."

McCabe wet his lips and blinked dazedly.

Temple hurriedly strode across and pounded a hard fist onto the president's desk.

"Do you know what those figures revealed? That meteor swarm was travelling somewhere between seventeen and twenty miles a second—far slower than the average meteor velocity. And unless the figures are wrong —*they came from the moon!*"

"The moon!" McCabe parroted feebly. "But I don't see the connection between that and our lost group."

"I don't either!" Temple barked. "But I'm leaving for Kansas tonight and if there *is* a connection, I'll find it if I have to tear the whole universe apart!"

CHAPTER III

Bhazh the Great

FIVE days earlier, the meteor expedition had arrived at the location of the fall with high hopes and intense enthusiasm. There was a world of bitter, back-breaking work to be done, but none of the nine persons in the group had any thought for the labor involved.

For the first time, a sizable meteoric fall had occurred before witnesses in the midst of habitable country. For the first time, some of the age-old cosmic secrets might be revealed before relentless Time had hidden them from the searching eyes of curious man.

First of all, there was the camp itself to be set up. The Solles and their hired man were employed on the spot to help with the manual labor of the job.

The shacks were ranged in two facing rows, alternating with the parked trucks to form a short street. At the north end of this street, the laboratory shack was erected. This was actually two of the smaller shacks built together to house the instruments, equipment and benches.

Beside the laboratory was the focus of interest and activity, the great roped-off area of impact craters where the nine closely-bunched aerolites had burrowed into the earth. Beyond casting longing, wistful eyes at the craters, no one touched the sacred section until the last shack was up and in place, the last instrument set, the last wire and tube connected and ready for the vital task ahead.

Although the meteorites themselves lay only a few feet below the surface, it was five days before any attempt was made to uncover or lift them from their graves. A dozen vital tasks, many of them suggested by Curtis Temple in

planning the expedition, must come first.

There was the problem of learning from what part of space the visitors had come. That involved interviewing everyone who had glimpsed the fierce flame of the rocks before impact, sifting a welter of faulty memories, optical errors and vague guesses to ferret out the fragments of fact.

Farmer Olson had seen the fireballs over his cowbarn roof; banker Simms, through his bedroom window; a young country school teacher, ten miles west, was sure they came from right up *there*.

The Solles could not agree on which of three widely separated constellations overhead had seemed to frame the first faint sparks.

No matter how insignificant, each fact was weighed and judged and fitted, at last, into the growing composite picture of the great swarm's path through the atmosphere from its radiant point. When the path was finally charted and found to coincide with the angle of impact suggested by the craters, there was rejoicing in the camp, and the mathematicians went to work.

THERE was work for all sciences. Chemistry attacked the rims of the craters, analyzing the soil content and composition, estimating the amount of heat generated by impact and from that, the possible velocity of the rocks.

Bacteriology probed the scorched earth in fruitless search for signs of living organisms sloughed off during passage. Physics ranged the wheat field, striking the baked prairie with carefully-measured blows to compute its surface resistance to impact.

Pop-eyed visitors came from counties around to gape at the spectacle. Bored reporters drifted in, snapped dull shots and went away, still bored.

The evening of the fifth day everyone stood in the circle of light from portable floods and watched the first and largest of the nine aerolites glide up over the rim of its pit, drawn by windlass on the power truck.

Arnie Cole and the Solles, father and son, guided the cables and steadied the wood beams that served as track for the heavy rock. Dr. Eno Rocossen, chief astronomer and head of the group, supervised the job, hovering over the dingy chunk of cosmic debris as solicitously as a mother hen over her chick.

There was a concerted rush to examine the basketball sized alien as it came to rest beside the lab shack. Lee Mason, on her knees beside Jacobs, the chemist, fingered the fused surface of the aerolite in frowning bewilderment.

"I've examined a lot of siderites, siderolites and aerolites," she said finally, "but never one quite like this. It obviously isn't an iron or an ironstone, yet it seems to lack the chondritic structure of a true stone.

"And I've never seen anything like that hard, pitchy coating over one before. Jake, when are you going to start an analysis test? I have a feeling you'll run into a completely unique chemical constitution. I wish Curt could have been here to see this."

Jacobs grinned and reached for a geologist's hammer.

"We all miss Curt—but not for the same reason, Lonely Heart. Here, let's crack off a few chips and run a test on them right now. I'm as curious as you are. We'll try some simple ones tonight and then start a test for occluded gases first thing in the morning."

"Wait!" Lee Mason's hand on the chemist's arm halted the first hammer blow. "When your arm threw a shadow, just then—Jake, switch off the lights a moment."

As swift darkness followed the click of the switch, a concerted gasp rose.

"Radioactive," Lee exclaimed. "I *thought* I saw a faint, greenish glow in the shadow. Can you beat that? Our meteorite *is* unique. Other stoneys have only been about a fourth as radioactive as ordinary terrestrial granite, which isn't very much."

"Looks like we found something, all right," Jacobs assented excitedly, lifting the hammer. "Well, here goes for a sample. I'll chip off some for your spectroscope tests, too. Why, what's wrong with you, Lee?"

On her knees, Lee Mason was swaying dizzily, her lovely face drawn into a tight, startled frown. She shook her head dazedly, after a moment, and her face cleared.

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess, Jake. Just for a moment I had the oddest sensation—a sort of cold dread at the thought of chipping the covering on the stone. But I'm all right, now. Go ahead and crack our egg."

Jacobs touched her pale forehead without feeling the glow of fever, frowned, shrugged and turned back to his task.

"Sump'n you et, most likely," he said lightly. "Watch where the chips fly, Lee. We can't afford to waste a single grain."

AN hour later, the entire expedition crowded into the small laboratory for the first rough analysis tests. Scientific curiosity ran at too high a pitch for anyone to think of sleep

Before Temple could dodge, a ghostly beam caressed his pistoning legs (Chapter VIII)

that night. Fragments chipped from the stones waited in nine labelled envelopes to tell their hidden stories to the ears of science.

Dr. Eno Rocossen finished polishing his spectacles and took out the contents of the first envelope.

"Jameson, you go ahead with a micro examination of both sheath and matrix, using this little chip here. Kinsell, you help Jacobs on the—"

He stopped speaking, blinked dazedly and passed a trembling hand across his forehead. The precious bits of aerolite dribbled out of his lax palm, unheeded. He gripped the lab bench hard, leaning on it as though for support.

"Doctor," Lee cried in sudden alarm, starting forward, "are you ill?"

He straightened, waving her back. His ascetic face regained its composure. Only his eyes seemed different—flat and empty.

"No," he said in an oddly changed voice. "No, I'm quite all right. I've made the connection, now. It's—it's a bit confusing for a few moments but that passes almost immediately. You may all take hold."

Through a moment of dead silence, all eyes stared incredulously, wonderingly. There was no sense in the words, but there was something vaguely menacing in their hidden import. Lee Mason gaped in horror, wondering if the great man had suddenly gone mad.

Then a disturbance across the room caught her gaze. The chubby physicist, Lansdon, was stumbling toward Rocossen, a strange expression on his moon face.

He halted and his hands moved feebly in a vague salute.

"Yes," he said oddly, "it is dizzying at first. You—you're Bhazh, aren't you? I'm Tas Il."

Beside Lee, the gaunt, sardonic Jacobs, whose name ranked second to none in knowledge of star chemistry, bowed low.

"And here is Gniz, oh mighty Bhazh!"

Lee Mason gaped in bewilderment and sank down weakly on the nearest bench.

"It couldn't be that everybody here has gone crazy except me," she said to herself. "It must be that they're all sane and I've gone crazy so the sane things they say and do sound like crazy things to my crazy mind. It *must* be that! Oh, Lord, I wonder if Curt'll come and visit me in the asylum."

She stiffened abruptly and a sharp gasp burst from her lips. Like a dash of ice water, something infinitely cold touched and clung to the base of her skull. She slapped at it, tried to brush it away, but her hand met nothing except the soft cloud of her hair.

Lee tried to rise and her strength refused the task. The thing on her neck was burrowing, digging incredibly icy tentacles through flesh and skull bone and deep into the matter of her brain. She tried to scream and no sound would come.

Then the icy finger touched some unknown sensitive spot, deep in her brain and a swift stab of utter agony lanced through every nerve in her body. It was like a dentist's drill touching the raw nerve of a tooth, only worse—a hundred times worse. The agony died and with it, her senses.

A moment later Lee Mason rose stiffly, turned and bowed low toward Dr. Eno Rocossen. Her voice came stiffly, woodenly:

"Vrag is connected, Great Bhazh. You have succeeded in all things, beyond the greatest vision of our master."

Dr. Eno Rocossen, whose prim figure was familiar to every astronomical group and conference and society in the world, grinned like a satyr and pounded his breast.

"Of course," he acknowledged. "Did I not promise that it would come to pass? And am I not Bhazh—Bhazh the Great?"

CHAPTER IV

The Mystery Deepens

DARKNESS had fallen by the time Curtis Temple finished packing his suitcase. He hoisted the heavy grip to a chair stared out of the window, seeing Lee Mason's face against the curtain of the night.

At midnight he would take the plane to Wichita and change to a train for the remainder of the journey to Bomer and the site of the vanished encampment. But even the start of that journey was four hours into the future. Now there was nothing but the interminable agony of waiting, the bitter helplessness of his position in the face of the mystery.

He turned from the window and paced the floor, driving a clenched fist into his open palm, gritting his teeth against the onslaught of vague, formless terrors that chilled his blood. If only someone had seen the expedition breaking camp, had heard the thunder

of the caravan's passage in the night, had even found evidence of violence at the camp-site—

It would give the mystery a foundation of reality, give him something to get his teeth into. This horrible *blankness* dug into his nerves. He had the weird feeling of standing on the brink of some vast unknown, of being about to blunder awkwardly into conflict with some cosmic influence beyond human comprehension or resistance.

He swore at the thought and tried to reason his jangled nerves back to calmness. What had actually happened? A group of sane, intelligent people had seen fit to abandon a site and a project, perhaps for some greater research that unexpectedly beckoned.

No one had happened to notice their departure and they, consumed with the wonder of some new discovery, had forgotten to communicate with their sponsors. There was nothing too unusual in that. Temple himself had, on occasion, become so engrossed in research that he had forgotten to eat or sleep or report himself for days on end.

His eyes lighted with the impact of a new thought. It was so beautifully simple and logical that only his disturbed mental state could have caused him to overlook it before. What had happened was obvious.

Another meteorite had fallen. Perhaps it was one of the same swarm that had been detached from the group and hurled to earth some distance away. The expedition, seeing or hearing of this new mass, had simply moved camp to the new site.

They had not as yet had time to reestablish communication with the University or even the nearby town. Of course that was what had happened. It *had* to be that way!

Curtis Temple laughed shakily and turned to the telephone beside his bed. He would phone McCabe and set the prexie's mind at rest with that explanation.

He was bending over the instrument, smiling a little at his own earlier panic, when the window behind him slammed to the top of its frame and a harsh voice cried:

"Stand right still, there, young man. Put that there telephone down quiet and don't reach out for nothing."

Temple whirled around toward the sound of the voice and his eyes snapped wide. He stood there for a moment, rigid with shocked incredulity.

THE intruder was a woman, but that fact Temple could have taken in his stride. It was her incredible appearance that made him reel and doubt his own sanity.

She was a woman of perhaps fifty-five, tall and gaunt, with black hair stringy around her wrinkled face. Her skin was rough and reddened from wind and sun, and the old gingham dress she wore was faded from innumerable washings. As Temple stared dazedly, she climbed in through the open window and menaced him with the weapon clutched in her knobby, toil-worn hands—a pitchfork!

The woman held the sharp tines of the pitchfork close to Curtis Temple's chest and stared at him for a long moment with faded eyes that were as blank and lifeless as the windows of an empty house. Finally she jerked her head.

"That your belongins—all packed nice in that there grip?"

"Y—yes," Temple managed, swallowing hard. "Who are you? What on earth—"

"Don't matter," the woman snapped. "Git your grip and come along. Nice you had it ready. Saves waitin' around fer you to pack."

Temple took a deep, steadying breath and let his hands drop to his sides. The woman was obviously an escaped maniac, a dangerous one with that crude weapon, and the thing to do was humor her. He managed a sickly imitation of a placating smile.

"Now, I'll be glad to go with you. Just tell me where you intend taking me and—"

A spark glowed for a moment in the depths of the blank eyes. The pitchfork lifted, moved, and one of the sharp tines raked painfully across Curtis Temple's cheek, drawing blood.

"If you aim to get the best o' me, don't try. Just get that grip and git goin'. You'll know where soon enough."

The stinging of the scratch on his cheek decided Temple against resistance. Still more than half convinced he was somehow dreaming all this, he hoisted his packed bag and slid obediently out onto the dark lawn.

The pitchfork shifted and prodded him ungently between the shoulder blades. Under its compelling urge, he moved out across the lawn to the dark street in front. There, only the constant pricking of the sharp tines kept him from halting in fresh amazement.

A car waited at the curb—an ancient relic of a Ford touring car with cracked windshield and a tattered fabric top held down by straps and ropes. Behind the steering wheel sat a gaunt, weather-beaten man in faded overalls. There was a second figure in the back seat, concealed by the darkness. Temple stiffened as light from a distant street lamp showed a muddy Kansas license plate on the back of the Ford.

"I got him, Gus," Temple's captor cried as they neared the car. "He was all packed fer travelin' so we didn't need to wait around."

"That's good, Martha," the gaunt man approved. "Put him in here by me an' you—"

Temple was close enough to see the figure in the back more clearly. He stopped short, ignoring the jabbing tines, and a low harsh sound rose in his throat.

The man in the back seat was Mullane, the astronomer!

"Good evening, Curtis," Mullane spoke, then, in an odd voice that somehow held a quality of *unhumanness*. "Step right in. I know you must wonder what all this is about, Curt, but I assure you it's all for a purpose—a *great* purpose—and presently you will understand."

"I hope so," Temple growled, relief bringing a surge of boiling anger. "Mully, if this is one of your gags. . . ."

HE stopped short, one foot on the running board, his hand in the act of swinging open the car door. For just an instant he had felt a queer, dizzying sensation, like the touch of small cold fingers wriggling momentarily in his hair. The subtle impact made him gasp like a swimmer plunging into icy water.

Then Mullane and the gaunt man were both leaning forward, staring at him with a queer feverish intensity. There was something about them, Temple could see then, that was not quite right. It seemed to be their eyes. . . .

"Not this one," the gaunt man said suddenly, sharply. "Not this one at all."

"Go back to your room, Curt," Mullane said then, like a parent instructing a child. "This was all a mistake. You go inside again and forget all about what—"

"I'll be blasted if I will!" Temple roared in a sudden burst of rage. "Something's wrong about all this—*plenty* wrong! I don't know what it is, but the answer's down in Kansas. These two came from Kansas and they're snatching you, Mully. I'll stop it—and I'll get to the bottom of what's going on!"

He surged forward, swung a fist at the gaunt man. His arm hit one of the straps holding the top down and the blow missed its target. Still roaring, Temple lunged over the side of the car, hands clutching at the man's gaunt throat.

He forgot the woman behind him until unbelievably powerful hands clawed into his shoulders and jerked him back from the car. He spun helplessly, saw the pitchfork swing up, reversed, caught a glimpse of Mullane's weazened face watching him with detached, sad-eyed interest.

Then the handle of the pitchfork slammed along the side of his jaw with desperate fury. Curtis Temple had time for an instant of thankfulness that it had not struck the back of his head to undo all the doctors' fine work. Then the blackness of oblivion caught him up and swept his senses away.

CHAPTER V

Word from the Missing

OBLIVIOUS to both heat and dust, Curtis Temple rocked on his heels under the afternoon sun and

stared with dull eyes at the nine dark chunks of stone—all that remained of the meteor camp. There was nothing else, save the nine raw scars from which the meteorites had been dug.

Fifty deputies scoured the surrounding plains for signs of the missing expedition. Two FBI men systematically took the Solle farm apart in search of clues. Others ranged the countryside, questioning endlessly and fruitlessly.

In the eighteen hours that had passed since the abduction of Mullane, the astronomer, and the weird attack on Temple, nothing had happened to lighten the mystery. Rather, it had been deepened.

The blow to the jaw had stunned Curtis Temple for no more than a dozen minutes. Immediately thereafter, his breathless report had police combing the streets, throwing an airtight cordon around the city. But to no avail. The Kansas Ford with its kidnappers and Mullane, their victim, had vanished completely.

Before Temple boarded his plane at midnight, two more of the nation's leading scientists had disappeared, seized by weatherbeaten men in overalls, armed with farm implements as weapons. It might have been a burlesque of crime, except for the steadily-deepening under-current of nameless horror.

Stillwell, the FBI man, met Temple when he arrived at the camp-site the next afternoon. From fingerprints and the descriptions of eye-witnesses, the FBI had identified the kidnappers.

Martha and Gus Solle had abducted Mullane and attacked Curtis Temple. Young Gus Solle, junior, had seized Dr. Rayfield, the authority on atomic power. Arnie Cole, the hired man, had abducted Lanelle, inventor of the new oxylium explosive.

Beyond that knowledge, the FBI was as stumped as everyone else. Four simple farmers, twelve of the best minds of science and some eighty-thousand dollars' worth of instruments and equipment had apparently vanished from the face of the earth. There was no conceivable reason, though the newspapers screamed Fifth Column, and crackpots besieged the Dies Committee headquarters.

Nor was there any apparent information to be gained from the meteorites themselves.

To Temple's trained eye, they were obviously unlike the recorded types of stony aerolites.

But this was apparently no more than a matter of physical composition, and so little was yet known about meteorites that this meant nothing beyond the discovery of a new, rare type. Yet his mind persisted in linking them with the mystery. Why, he could not tell.

PERHAPS it was because he could not forget the older mystery of why Kansas had been singled out for the grim bombardment from the skies. According to scientific calculation, taking all types of meteorites together, the rate of fall should average something like one to a square mile every million years.

Or maybe it was because the face of Lee Mason seemed to look out at him from every stone, a dark unfathomable pleading in her blue eyes.

He turned away from the nine grim secrets in stone and went back to the Solle farmhouse. Stillwell, the FBI man, met him on the porch.

"Any news?" Temple asked, for the tenth time.

Stillwell mopped his streaming forehead and swore.

"Yes and no. Nothing about your girl, but the Solles turned up. Walked into the police station in Cincinnati an hour ago and asked for help to get back here."

"Then they can explain what's happened. They'll know where the other—"

Stillwell shook his head.

"But they don't. Our field man in Cincy is with them now and getting no place fast. They claim the last thing they remember is standing around camp that night, watching the meteors cracked open. The next thing they knew, they were all waking up in their old Ford on this edge of the Pennsylvania hills.

"They can't remember a thing in between and didn't know how they got there. They pooled what money they had and started home but it gave out,

along with their gas, out on Reading Road in Cincinnati."

"They're lying," Temple cried hoarsely. "They must be. People don't drive in their sleep half-way across the continent and start kidnapping—"

"People don't just vanish into thin air, either," Stillwell interposed dryly, "but some did. I know how you feel, Temple, but it looks like we're facing the impossible on this case.

"Our men have given the Solles association tests and every known type of mental and physical exam—and we're not exactly amateurs, either. We've faced phony amnesia alibis before, but this time, I'm afraid they're telling the truth."

The ringing of the old-fashioned telephone inside the house interrupted them. Stillwell went in and leaned against the wall beside the big box-like instrument. Through the door, Temple could see the federal man stiffen and bend down closer to the long arm of the mouthpiece. He started into the house, feeling the sudden urge and pound of blood in his eardrums.

Stillwell said something explosive into the phone and pronged the receiver with a violent crash. He whirled around and stared at Curtis Temple.

"A heck of a note," he said flatly, angrily. "One heck of a fine note. Are all scientists nuts or do they just act that way to be different?"

"What do you mean?" Temple demanded, staring.

Stillwell's voice was bitter.

"*We* were looking for 'em. The cops and the county sheriffs and the state police and all their relatives and friends were looking for 'em, to say nothing of every half-witted amateur detective and newspaper reporter. The whole damn nation was looking for 'em! And they were never lost."

"*What?* What do you—"

Stillwell kicked a chair in an excess of baffled rage.

"I wish I'd stuck to accounting. The whole meteor crowd just got in touch with Culwain and Culwain notified Washington. They haven't *been* lost at all. They simply packed up, night before last, and moved to a new spot two miles east of Vingrove, Arizona.

"We couldn't trail them because they didn't follow the roads out of here. They cut across the prairie and the wind blew their tracks away. They're there, now, and your pal Mullane and the other missing scientists are with them.

"They've leased a camp-site out in the desert, ordered a trainload of supplies and materials and have a hundred workmen hired from all over that end of the state putting up a regular tar-paper city.

"Don't ask me why, or anything about it. I wouldn't know. I'm just a poor, simple—Hey! If you're going to put in a long distance call to Arizona, you'd better let me place it for you. I know how to handle that kind of phone and the kind of operator they've got in Bomer."

HALF an hour later Curtis Temple stood at the high wall phone, with the old-fashioned tubular receiver trembling against his ear and heard the voice that had haunted his dreams. He had not fully realized how frightened he had been for her safety until now.

"Lee! Darling! Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right," it was her voice, yet not her voice, lacking all the silvery overtones that gave it life and melody. "But I'm terribly busy, Curtis. You won't mind if I—"

"I do mind!" Temple snapped. "The whole country has been upset and I've been half out of my mind since you vanished. You can't just dismiss everything like that.

"Why did you leave the meteors and slip away like that? Why couldn't you have notified me? Lee, this isn't like you at all. What's going on that I can't know about? What is this important work that . . ."

"I'm sorry, Curtis," she cut in flatly, "but explanations will have to wait. In good time you will understand the project differently."

"Is it—has it something to do with the meteors?"

Temple heard the sharp hiss of a startled, indrawn breath. When she spoke again her voice was wary.

"No—well, yes, indirectly. It's something too vast and too vital to be delayed. I must go now. Goodb—"

"*Wait!*" he fairly shouted the word.

"Lee, I've got to see you. I still think something's terribly wrong. I'm going to Arizona. I'll be there tomorrow—"

"No!" She sounded suddenly panicky. "You must not come here. I *forbid* you to come here. I will not—"

He hung up, cutting off her protestations.

When he whirled from the phone, Stillwell was leaning against the wall close by, eyeing him queerly. An unlighted cigaret dangled from his lip. The FBI man had overheard part of the conversation and sensed the trend of the remainder.

"So that's that," he said, shrugging. "There's a train out of Bomer in about twenty minutes that'll take you back home. Or I would drive you over to Rockton. The line to Phoenix runs through there. Which'll you take, Temple?"

"Don't be an idiot," Temple roared. "Get me to Rockton as fast as you can. This isn't cleared up, by any means. Something's wrong with Lee Mason and I'm going to find out what."

"Good boy," Stillwell hurled away his unlighted cigaret and reached for his hat. "Something's wrong with the whole setup, but my hands are tied, now. If those men weren't kidnapped, then the FBI's out of the case.

"From here on, it's your headache, boy, and I've got a feeling all hades is about due to break loose somewhere. If you need any personal help, call on me, Temple."

Neither of them could know how right Stillwell was, nor that he would be dead within forty-eight hours—the first victim of the terrible inferno that he had predicted.

CHAPTER VI

The Crimson Plague

THE spring blooming of cactus made the desert a carpet of breath-taking beauty under the morning sun. But Temple, forcing his rented car at top speed over the rutty trail from Vingrove, had no eyes for the beauty around him.

His attention was focussed on the huddle of dark buildings rising out of the desert floor ahead. Even at that distance, he recognized the familiar black shacks and the row of University trucks, and the sight brought a lump into his throat.

But the swift stab of nostalgia was swept away in sheer wonderment at the changes wrought. The original six shacks were dwarfed by a vaster camp mushrooming above and around them.

In the center of the area, a towering, windowless building, large enough to contain the original camp twice over, loomed skyward. Radiating from this central structure were wide streets lined with additional shacks in various stages of construction.

It was unbelievable, impossible—yet there it was. In town, Temple had been told that the camp settled on a barren spot in the desert. Now, forty-eight hours later, a miniature city was racing skyward.

Some of the incredible speed of progress was accounted for by the flimsy frame and tar paper construction of all the buildings. More was due to the

[*Turn page*]

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vast hordes of workmen who swarmed like flies, raising an infernal din of sawing and hammering.

But manpower alone could not account for the miracle. Behind it must lie that same mysterious, inhuman driving stimulus that had accomplished the impossible in moving the first camp overnight. What that relentless urge was, Temple grimly determined to find out.

The speeding car topped a small rise and ground to a sudden skidding halt. Ahead, the trail was barred by a massive steel gate, from either side of which a high, steel-mesh fence ran out to encircle the entire camp. Signs conspicuously posted on gate and fence read:

DANGER—CHARGED FENCE!
50,000 VOLTS!

Temple's eyes became glittering slits in the taut gray mask of his face. He got out of the car and strode purposefully toward the gate, fists swinging free.

Beyond the barricade, a chunky man in shirt sleeves and stained straw hat burst out of a tiny guardhouse, a heavy revolver bumping on one thigh. The chunky man waved his hands.

"Keep back, bud. This here's private property and there's enough hot juice in that gate to kill an elephant. Nobody gets in, so don't argue. Just beat it, *fast!*"

"Take it easy," Temple snapped coldly. "I want to talk to Miss Mason. Tell her it's Curtis Temple. She'll see me."

The chunky man gave the revolver a hitch and spat on the hot sand.

"I doubt it, bud. This crowd don't exactly go in for social contacts. But I'll try, anyhow."

He vanished into the guardhouse and returned presently, shaking his head.

"Miss Mason says she ain't got time to chin. She says beat it home and she'll get in touch with you later."

"Then let me talk to Mullane or Rocossen or—"

The chunky man tightened his lips and shook his head.

"Nope. She said for you not to pester nobody else, neither. Sorry, bud. You run along, now, like a good guy."

Temple controlled himself with an effort and swung on his heel. Force would gain him nothing against that deadly charged barrier. He paused suddenly.

"What's going on in there, anyhow? What are the build—"

"I wouldn't know, bud. I just watch the gate." The chunky man shrugged and spat again. "For the dough they pay, I wouldn't even know if this was Arizona or Iceland."

TEMPLE'S jaw tightened. He whirled back to the car, threw it into low gear and stepped out on the running board as it lurched ahead.

"Hey!" He stopped the retreating guard with a shout. "You'd better step back a little. There may be some sparks flying when my car goes through your gate, fellow."

The gateman stared, swore and windmilled his arms.

"*Don't!* Hey, stop that crate! Wait'll I phone the office again. Judas Priest, I only *work* here, bud."

Waiting only long enough to see Temple slide in and stop the rolling car, he plunged back into his booth. A moment later he came back into sight, mopping his forehead.

"Sit tight, you crazy idjit," he panted. "She's comin' out. Don't do nothing screwy till she comes, for gosh sakes!"

Temple saw her, then, hurrying across the hard-packed sand at the same accelerated tempo that seemed to mark everything about the camp and his breath caught in his throat. It was Lee Mason, with all the loveliness he knew so well.

Yet something was lacking, something that defied analysis. The perfection of line and color was there, but the innate personality was gone. She was like a beautiful wax doll, a perfect image in everything but the vital spark of animation.

She ignored the guard and came to the gate, staring through with no warmth in her flawless face to meet Temple's smile.

"Why are you making this disturbance, annoying me and interrupting my work? I told you not to come here, Curtis."

Her sharp rebuke was a knife stab in his heart.

"I had to come, Lee, to find out what happened to you, what changed you from a human being into a—"

"Sentiment!" she spat and for an instant some faint spark flamed in her eyes. "I won't have it. My work here is too big and too vital to be disturbed by silly emotional crisis. There is no room for personal feelings in—"

Temple's lips peeled back from his teeth.

"Why were Mullane and those others kidnapped?" he interrupted sharply, watching her face.

"Kidnapped?" she echoed coldly. "They came willingly in response to an appeal the Solles carried for us—"

"I don't believe you," Temple snapped. "Solle's old Ford could never have made that trip in so short a time. And you can't explain why Mullane and the others didn't leave word for their families if they came willingly, or why Solles have lost their memories, or—"

"Solles' mental condition is of no interest to me," Lee cut in coldly. "The men came secretly to avoid delay.

"As to the trip, the Ford was carried east in the back of a fast truck. On the return trip, Solles decided to stop over in the east so they and their car were dropped off in Pennsylvania."

Temple's jaw set grimly. That explained how the Ford and its passengers eluded the police cordon, hidden inside a closed truck. It was a cever dodge—*too* clever to have originated in the minds of simple farmers. The explanation only intensified Temple's nebulous suspicions.

"You don't expect me to swallow that, Lee," he said flatly. "You aren't talking or acting this way of your own free will. I'm convinced of that.

"I'll go now, but I'm coming back and I'm going to get to the root of this mystery. If you're hypnotized, Lee, or held by some threat—"

She whirled away and faced the waiting guard nearby.

"If you see that man sneaking around," she ordered coldly, pointing at Temple, "or trying to get through the fence, use your revolver. Those are orders. This is private property and we have a legal right to defend our privacy with weapons. Is that understood, guard?"

"*Lee*"—

The cold, inhuman words were hammer blows that smashed into Temple's reeling brain, exploded sharp agony in his heart and sent him reeling back on trembling limbs. He lifted a hand toward her and then dropped it to his side.

He turned away, then, his eyes dull and his face rigid, inflexible.

This was not Lee Mason, not the laughing girl who had worked with him in the lab and walked hand in hand with him under the stars on Culwain campus. That was an alien creature, a lovely shell from which all humanity had been drained.

Why or how he could not guess, but his fists suddenly ached with tension and his lips moved in a silent bow. Somehow he would bring the vital spark back to her eyes, the warmth into her lovely face once more.

Meanwhile, he faced a superhuman task. He was a blind man groping in the darkness. He must steel himself against heartache, put aside every emotion, become as ruthless and cold as she.

Without looking back, he got into his car and returned to his hotel in Vingrove to lay plans.

That afternoon the Crimson Plague made its horrible debut in Bomer, Kansas.

Stillwell, the FBI man, was its first victim.

STILLWELL and his aides, their reports finished, had checked out of their hotel for the return to the Wichita Field Office. They were leaving the hotel, approaching their car at the curb when it happened. A dozen passers-by saw the tragedy.

Without warning Stillwell's voice broke in the midst of a remark. He stiffened, his lean body rocking up onto its toes with every joint locked in intolerable tension. An expression of terrible agony framed a cry that was never uttered.

To the onlookers, it seemed that some terrible internal pressure literally blasted every drop of blood in his body out to the surface, turning the puffed

flesh a hideous crimson, dotting it with tiny droplets of exuded blood.

For an instant Stillwell poised on his toes, then plunged forward into the arms of a companion. When a doctor who had stopped in passing reached the victim's side, all signs of life had vanished.

No one thought of contagion. The doctor saw only a rare and exciting case of organic malfunction. The onlookers, pressing close, saw only a morbidly-fascinating form of violent death. Willing hands carried the hideous travesty of a human form across the street to the funeral establishment.

"It beats me," the doctor told the gaping crowd when he completed a sketchy examination. "I'm going to report this to the state association right now."

He reached for the phone, stiffened and collapsed with the same horrible suffusion of blood masking his flesh. The crowd fled in a panic. One of those who had borne Stillwell's body was struck down in the doorway to the funeral home, another in the street outside.

Queerly, neither of Stillwell's fellow FBI men were stricken. They risked death a hundred times through the night to cheat the Crimson Killer, whipping the crowds into a semblance of sanity, carrying the bodies of victims to an unused shed far out on the edge of town.

No more victims fell that night or the next morning. An army of medical warriors arrived in the night and went to work, analysing and testing the bodies, the soil, water, air and food of the town. But results were negative. No unfamiliar germs were found, no organic reason for the seizures. Medical science stood baffled and helpless.

"Doctors equipped with every modern defense against contagion, buried the victims far from town. Two hours later three doctors, a nurse, the sexton who had volunteered to fill the graves and an innocent farmer two miles from the scene of burial succumbed to a return of the Plague.

By nightfall, a circle of armed guardsmen surrounded Bomer to prevent the flight of refugees who might spread what the newspapers now called the Crimson Plague.

That night a mob of grim-faced townsmen threw gasoline and flaming torches at the shed where Plague victims lay. A roaring flame sprang up to consume shed and bodies within a space of minutes, and the mob turned away, its task completed.

A sudden shift of wind suddenly whipped a shower of ashes from the ruins out into the crowd. Instantly, two men dropped with the terrible mask of the Plague on their faces. The survivors fled, half insane with terror.

At midnight, the nation's leading medical man faced a group of colleagues in secret meeting.

"I'll tell you," he said grimly, "though I won't tell the country at large until I have to. We're stumped. The Plague can't be anticipated, checked nor barred by anything we know. Neither burial nor cremation seem to effect its spread. We don't know what it is, where it came from or how to stop it.

"Gentlemen, unless some way is found to utterly isolate the body of every Crimson Plague victim beyond any possibility of contact with human beings, the Plague may sweep the earth."

CHAPTER VII

Blue Thunder Rising

TEMPLE, pacing the floor of his hotel room in Vingrove, heard the radio reports of the Crimson Plague and groaned aloud.

The gods must hate Kansas!

The meteorites had fallen on Kansas, the weird change in the personalities of the scientists occurred there, and now the Crimson Plague had burst forth from the same deadly focal point. It was too much to blame on casual coincidence. Behind the linking mysteries must lie a dark, sinister pattern of some kind, a pattern that maddened Temple because it eluded him.

Why hadn't he caught the Plague if it was a virulent contagious disease? He had been in close contact with Still-

well a few short hours before his attack and had moved through the same atmosphere.

Were the deadly, unseen organisms of the disease lurking even now in his system, waiting their time to strike? Was the Crimson Plague somehow behind the unnatural actions of Lee Mason and her associates?

The endless chain of unanswered questions blurred inside his aching head. There was only one way to learn those answers and that was to penetrate the guarded camp and ferret out its hidden secrets. There must be some way into camp.

Temple paced the streets, asking endless questions of store-keepers and anyone else having contact with the camp, making and discarding a hundred wild schemes. He watched the familiar Culwain trucks disgorge loads of workmen from the day shift and pick up new workers for the night.

His hope of slipping into the group, disguised as a carpenter, were dashed when he saw that each man bore an identification disc riveted to his wrist, with numbers carefully checked against a register.

He got his car and drove out to camp, slipping off the road some distance from the gate to circle the fence on foot. Inside, the workmen tore through their tasks under the beating glare of powerful floods, putting finishing touches on the last of the new structures. From the towering central building came the flame and sputter of electric arcs.

Temple circled warily, keeping outside the backwash of lights, without seeing a single guard patroling the fence. Maybe he could insulate himself in some way and climb over the barricade while attention centered on the work inside.

Fate interferred to keep him from a fatal blunder. Her instrument was a stray steer from some nearby range that chose that moment to wander out of a dark arroyo. Temple saw the animal a moment before it poked an inquisitive nose against the wide mesh of the fence.

He saw the steer and then he was half-blinded by the sudden blaze of greenish flame from shorted high tension current that blazed around the stiffening body. As the steer went down, bells jangled warningly from the heart of camp. A knot of men raced into sight carrying rifles and shotguns, dashing toward the shorted section of fence.

Temple faded back into the darkness, returned to his car and drove to town. His eyes were twin flames in the gray granite mask of his face and a white-knuckled fist pounded at the steering wheel in helpless agony.

Somehow the electrocution of the wandering steer filled him with a deeper horror than anything else that had occurred. It drove home, with terrible emphasis, the change that had taken place in Lee and his friends. The careless indifference to human lives evidenced by that crouching death trap clawed at his raw nerves.

He spent the remainder of the night in his room, pacing the floor, driving his numbed brain to contrive new theories to explain the mystery and new plans for penetrating it.

And during the night the Crimson Plague circled out from Bomer, Kansas, striking in a score of towns within a radius of fifty miles of its starting point.

NEXT morning the streets of Vingrove were jammed with men. During the night construction work had been completed at camp, the men paid off and discharged.

Temple wasted most of the day hunting out these workmen and badgering them with fruitless questions. They knew nothing beyond the fact that they had built and wired frame shacks to a plain specification. What those shacks were to be used for, no one knew or cared. No, they had seen nothing suspicious unless driving and double wages could be called suspicious.

Only a few men, chiefly welders and riveters, seemed evasive and sullen. Temple learned nothing from them, but he gave up, convinced that these men were simply bewildered because they could not remember exactly what their work had been. He was positive that, like the Solles, they had somehow lost all memories of their activities inside the camp.

Get inside the camp! Get inside the camp!

The words became a refrain that hammered Temple's frozen brain with the monotonous agony of an endless drum-beat. He paced the streets and the desert sands to their aching rhythm, timed his prayers and his curses to their endless repetition, ate little and slept less because the insistent clamor of their command would not give him any peace.

What was Lee doing in there? What were they doing to her? Was she sick or well? Was there any spark of feeling for him still hidden somewhere in her heart?

Get into the camp, the endless refrain cried. Get into the camp and find out!

Days of agony passed for Temple. He spent long hours on a nearby hilltop, watching the camp through strong glasses. He saw Lee and the others frequently, rushing on mysterious feverish errands that centered inside the big central building. A half-dozen sullen-faced guards had been hired and they spent much of their days hauling steel sheets and beams from dwindling piles outside into the main structure.

Nights, Temple battered his bloody head against the impregnable defenses of the camp. He was caught twice, stowed away in the back of incoming trucks.

He hurled chains to short circuit the fence but was driven off when the alarm bells brought armed guards.

He tried ramming the fence with his car and was stopped by stakes set deep in the sand. A tunnel under the barricade met steel posts sank deep in the ground. Twice he was shot at by guards and narrowly escaped death. Still the unremitting refrain *get into the camp* drove him on.

Meanwhile, the Crimson Plague leaped out from Bomer, Kansas, in ever-widening circles. It broke all the known laws of contagion, skipping obvious victims and ignoring the feeble defenses raised against it. When the Plague chose to strike, it struck without regard for science's punny barriers. Doctors risked their lives to autopsy victims and found nothing to indicate either a cause or a cure.

Only one thing was certain. Unless mankind found some remote corner of the universe in which to entomb the bodies of Plague victims, the spread could never be checked. Most of the cases apparently rose from contact with Plague bodies, no matter what efforts were made at disinfection nor how remote that contact might be.

THE thirteenth day after his last talk with Lee, Temple saw a fresh burst of activity sieze the camp. All day the group hauled bundles into the main building with frantic haste. When nightfall brought no cessation of the mysterious activity, Temple stayed at his hilltop post, watching through his nightglasses.

He saw figures moving on the roof of the big structure and presently the roof itself seemed to split apart and open a gaping chasm through its center. In that chasm, Temple could faintly see a round, blunt-nosed cylinder poked upward but the resolving power of his glasses was too weak to make out details.

Whatever was happening, he felt, marked the culmination of the mysterious project. The thought doubled his determination to penetrate the camp that night, regardless of cost. He left his post, then, and drove down the winding trail toward the darkened camp.

He was half a mile from his goal, in the lee of a high hill when the thing happened.

He first became aware of it as a distant muttering rumble, more vibration than sound. The earth shook to its thunder, sand billowed from the shifting dunes and the steering wheel wobbled in his grasp. With the thought of an earthquake uppermost in his mind, Temple braked the car and kicked open the door.

At that instant, the thunder suddenly swelled, rising to an unbearable pressure against his eardrums. At the same time, a weird bluish light sprang up from some hidden point beyond the hills, illuminating the desert landscape with unbearable brilliance.

Then light and thunder whipped away, dwindling to a whisper that lingered an instant after the darkness had

once more closed in. By the time Temple got out of the car and looked upward, there was nothing. . . .

Nothing but a tiny speck of flame that burst up through the vast panorama of the constellations and was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

Into the Camp

CURTIS TEMPLE was an experienced meteor-hunter. His eyes and muscles had been trained to that superb coördination that is essential in capturing the secrets of elusive, fleeting meteor trails.

It was second nature for his eyes to chart the fragmentary course of that vanishing spark through the fixed stars, and reflex action for his fingers to clock its speed across a familiar asterism on the specially built timer in his wrist watch. When the spark finally disappeared, he glanced down at the dial and a sharp gasp broke through his lips.

He sprang into the car and snapped on the dome light. For half an hour he sat tensely, a pad of paper propped against the steering wheel, his pencil racing furiously, recording endless calculations and computations.

When at last he had finished, Curtis Temple sat back and drew a deep, incredulous breath. He had spent two feverish weeks attempting to fathom the activity within the camp and here lay the answer on his pad—supplied by a dying spark, a stopwatch and mathematics.

By the motion of the spark across a constellation whose *apparent* diameter he knew, he had obtained rough estimates of its speed away from earth. By his knowledge of the position of stars it occulted in its flight, he had arrived at a close approximation of its angle of departure. By projecting these figures, he had reached both a beginning and an end to the phenomena.

It was incredible, impossible. Yet the object could have been nothing but a rocket-propelled space ship, leaping up from the heart of the meteor camp at a speed that approached fifty miles a second. Workable rocket ships were still a dream of the future, so far as science knew, yet nothing but a man-made and man-propelled object could shatter the shackles of gravity at such a speed.

And unless his hasty projection of its tangent was far in error, it could have hurtled up into space toward only one possible objective—to intersect the orbit of the moon!

The nine black meteorites on the Kansas prairie had apparently come *from* the moon, and a rocket ship was apparently flying *to* the moon!

So many things became clear to him as he reluctantly accepted the evidence of his figures. The huge central building had housed the ship and its roof had opened to permit its departure. The tons of metal must have gone into construction of the craft.

Rayfield and Lanelle, authorities on atomic and explosive power, had obviously solved the problem of propulsion while Mullane supplied a keen knowledge of lunar topography.

But why? The solution of one mystery only intensified the greater one. Why keep such an accomplishment secret? Had the meteorites revealed the presence on the moon of some treasure hoard so vast that last for it turned human beings into mad machines?

A NEW thought struck Temple and whitened his cheeks. Had they all boarded that ship and left earth forever, perhaps deserting a world they foresaw was doomed by the spreading Plague? In the same breath he discarded the idea.

He had glimpsed enough of the ship to estimate its size. It could never transport twelve persons, even if they had accomplished miracles in solving the problem of air supply and fuel storage. Temple knew enough of the theoretical problems of astrogation to estimate a maximum carrying capacity of not over three or four persons.

Then the others were still in camp, and with them lay the solution to the deepening mystery. Temple kicked the motor to life, and sent the car rocketing along the rutty trail without lights, steering by the faint radiance of the

stars. As he drove, a desperate plan was forming in his mind.

He left the road and circled around behind the camp. It lay in darkness tonight, except for a scattering of lighted windows, but the full radiance of the floods was essential to his desperate plan.

Parking, he got an iron jack handle and a 30-30 rifle from the car. The rifle he had bought a week before on the off-chance that it might serve a future purpose. Tonight it was vital to his scheme.

Moving swiftly, he ran through the darkness and hurled the jack handle against the fence. Crackling flame leaped up at the impact and the shrill clangor of alarm bells burst out from camp. Instantly the floods came on, turning the night to day, revealing the knot of armed guards racing his way.

Temple stood for a moment, fixing the location of his target in his mind and then ran back to the car. Hunching up on the fender, he rested the rifle across the hood and centered its sights above the running men on the tiny black bulk of the transformer over the generator truck, nerve center of the deadly charged fence.

It was a desperate gamble, for the guards, hearing the whistle of slugs over their heads, would think themselves attacked and direct a withering return fire. Temple's eyes were narrow and cold with grim purpose as he squeezed the trigger.

The rifle *spanged* and bucked against his shoulder. From camp came the shrill scream of a ricochet as the slug glanced from the rounded transformer shell. The guards halted for a startled moment and then began firing. Lead whistled around Temple's head and clanged into the body of the car.

He ignored the hail of death, concentrating on bettering his aim. The guards were only a hundred yards away, yelling and shooting, when he fired again.

This time a burst of purple flame ripped up from his target and every light in camp whipped out. The sudden darkness was blinding and the guards halted with yells of alarm.

Instantly Temple slipped from the car and raced down the fence, away from the milling guards who scattered to find flashlights. More startled cries came from the camp.

Temple ignored the sounds until they faded behind him. Then he stopped and threw the rifle against the fence. There was no answering crackle of shorted current. The barrier was at least momentarily robbed of its deadliness. At any moment some emergency circuit might be cut in, restoring its murderous potentialities, but he brushed that thought aside.

Toes and fingers dug into the wide mesh and fairly hurled his lean bulk up to the top of the barricade. He poised there for a moment, then leaped out into the darkness.

He landed on all fours, ignored the vicious stab of cactus needles against his palms, and plunged forward toward the dark camp. He had to get in and find concealment before the lights came back on or the demoralized group organized their defenses.

Flashlights weaved in and out among the shacks ahead and centered on the generator truck. Temple pounded on and burst into the darker canyon of the camp street at a dead run. Ahead loomed the vast bulk of the rocket hangar and he headed toward it as the heart of the mystery he hoped to penetrate.

SUDDENLY a dark bulk sprang at him out of the shadows of parked trucks, and starlight glittered on the metal tube of a flashlight or a gun. Temple's ears caught the sharp inhalation of breath that preceeded a bellow of alarm. There was no time to identify the instrument or discover when the figure was that of a guard or one of his former friends.

Temple hurled himself at the dark figure and his fists lashed out. The impact of his knuckles against jaw bone sent a sharp tingle of pain up his arm. Then the figure was crumpling soundlessly. Temple's exploring fingers felt the cool bulk of a flashlight and he snatched it before racing on.

He was almost to the hangar when a puddle of yellow light from a flash swept out from between two shacks. Temple darted into the shadows and froze a moment before the light and

its bearer came into the street. He held his breath and saw the thin, ascetic face of Spirovic, professor of wave mechanics, behind the flashlight's glow.

The screen showed a luminescent ball clinging to the nape of the physicist's neck (Chapter X)

Spirovic halted while his light probed under the nearer parked trucks, miraculously missing the figure Temple had downed a moment before. Then the light swung away, and Temple drew a breath of relief. He was starting to creep on when the physicist suddenly halted, gasped and whirled back.

The flashlight's beam swept out unerringly and pinned Temple's crouching figure in its glare. Behind it the physicist's thin face was wolfish, predatory as he snatched at a small black case that looked like a candid camera hung at his side.

Temple did not wait to learn how Spirovic could have sensed his presence or what the case contained. He exploded into action, leaping straight at the glaring light.

His shoulder knocked the case from Spirovic's hands and sent his slight figure reeling. Temple kneed him down and burst down the street at a furious sprint. Behind him, the physicist's shrill voice rose in a shout of alarm that was echoed by other throats from all sides.

Temple glanced back and saw Spirovic on his feet, levelling the black case. Suddenly a ghostly bluish beam shot from the case. Before Temple could dodge, it caressed one of his pistoning legs.

The contact was a searing flame of agony. His leg went numb and crumpled, throwing him forward onto hands and knees. The beam winked out and Spirovic raced forward, bawling in a

triumphant voice, tugging a flashlight out of his pocket.

For a moment Temple lay in darkness. His right leg was a dead, useless thing without life or feeling. He dug elbows and clawed hands into the hard-packed sand and dragged himself away from the street, toward the dark space between two shacks. Flashlights sprang up around him, reaching out with hungry fingers. Temple blinked cold perspiration from his eyes and crawled on, his breath a wheezing anguish in his throat.

THE touch of the blue ray, whatever it was, had been no more than a light caress, and life began to tingle back into Temple's leg. He lurched to his feet and plunged into a grim travesty of a run, lurching and stumbling. For a moment the flashlights lost him. Then they picked up his trail in the sand.

Temple pounded on with blind, dogged determination until the towering walls of the central structure loomed up overhead. He stumbled against a small lean-to structure that leaned against the bigger building and his fumbling hands touched a heavy door handle.

The door fell away with weighty ponderousness, throwing him forward off balance into the inky interior. A blast of chill air struck his face. This must be a refrigerated storehouse for perishable supplies.

It was at least a temporary hiding place, regardless of its purpose. He eased the door shut and stumbled forward into the enveloping blackness.

His unsteady feet tangled with some yielding object. He teetered, clawed at the empty darkness and went down with a clatter across the thing that had tripped him. For a moment he lay still, fighting down the furious panting of his lungs, listening to the faint sounds of the search outside.

After a time he sat up, got out the captured flashlight and snapped it on under his coat. The circle of filtered radiance seeped through the cloth and spread out over the thing beneath him.

It was the fully clothed body of a man.

Temple's breath made a sharp wheezing sound in his nostrils. He scrambled to his knees and a human face showed in the glow of the light. Then the sound of his breathing stopped, and the body slipped back into the concealing shadows.

He had seen the face of the chunky gateman, suffused with the unmistakable spotted crimson of the Plague.

Then the outer door crashed open and a lance of the bluish light, sharper and stronger now, swept in to engulf him.

He knew a single stab of utter agony, then darkness.

CHAPTER IX

Flight from Vengeance

TEMPLE opened his eyes in shadowy gloom and stared dully at his surroundings. He was lying on an iron cot in a tiny, windowless room of unpainted planking with only a solid door of heavy timbers to relieve the blankness of the walls.

Overhead, through a low ceiling of heavy steel mesh, he saw a high-vaulted roof with daylight filtering through cracks and chinks. One crack, wider than the others, seemed to split the entire sweep of the roof into two massive sections.

That did it! Sight of the oddly-split roof broke the numbness in his brain. He sprang to his feet as the memories flooded back.

He had penetrated the camp, fallen on a Plague victim and been struck down by the mysterious paralyzing force of the blue beam. Now he was prisoner in a tiny cell inside the towering rocket hangar. The split roof was evidence of that.

Memory of the Plague victim brought a stab of terror to his heart. The Crimson Plague had struck the camp. Were there any other victims of its inexorable fury? Was Lee doomed to fall before it? Why had they left the body of that guard so open and unguarded? Why didn't they flee?

In a fury of desperation he lunged at

the door and the walls of his prison. He had to get out, get Lee away from the Plague area at once. The danger of his own exposure to the dread epidemic was swept away in his fears for her safety.

Small as his cell was, it was rock-solid. Temple gave up his efforts to batter down the door at last, and a measure of sanity came back to his brain. He looked around and the low-meshed ceiling caught his eye. He sprang up, hooked his fingers into the screen and pulled himself up against it.

His eyes snapped wide as the new position widened his angle of vision.

THE rocket ship was back! It lay in its massive cradle, pointing almost vertically upward, so close to his prison that it was barely beyond his angle of vision from the floor. His eyes sifted the gloom and made out a labyrinth of gears and pulleys that opened the split roof and tilted the cradle.

The ship itself was larger than he had at first thought—a good fifty feet in length, of tear-drop shape, with a maximum diameter of perhaps twenty feet. The nose rounded sharply to a tubular point and a few feet behind it the hull was encircled by what appeared to be a fluted metal collar.

Then he saw that the collar was actually a coweling that streamlined a ring of backward-pointing tubes projesting from the hull. He guessed these to be some sort of steering jets. Further back, the smooth metal was broken by stubby, retractable wings.

The entire hull was of dull, seamless metal, unbroken by any ports or doors. Entrance must be affected, he guessed, down close to the tail, which was below his line of vision.

Temple's muscles weakened, then, and he dropped to the floor again, his mind seething with new questions and problems. To all of them, there seemed but one source from which to get an answer—the group themselves.

He threw back his head, filled his lungs and shouted.

"Hey!" he roared. "What's the idea of locking me in here? Let me out!"

The shout boomed up to the vaulted roof and whispered away into silence. Temple waited, then shouted again.

This time he got results. A door creaked somewhere outside and footsteps clattered briskly.

A lock clicked outside his door, and a small peep-panel swung outward to frame the cold, expressionless face of Mullane.

"Stop creating a disturbance, Curtis," Mullane snapped sharply. "You were confined here to prevent further interruptions to our work. Please be sensible about it and remain quiet. You will be fed at regular intervals."

The words and the tone fanned the spark of Temple's suppressed anger into raging flame.

"Go to blazes!" he shouted furiously. "If I'm such a pest, why keep me around? Why don't you knock me in the head and shove me into cold storage with that other poor devil?"

"We considered that," Mullane said coldly, "and decided this way was better and less annoying. Please don't make us change our minds, Curtis."

"Why you—" Concern for Lee's safety suddenly dissolved his anger. "Mully, for God's sake, why did you leave that body lying out there? Has anyone else been stricken with the Plague? How is Lee? She can't stay here and risk—"

"Calm yourself," Mullane said curtly. "Miss Mason is in no danger. Her knowledge is too valuable to be risked."

He started to close the small panel.

"Wait!" Temple cried. "When did the rocket ship come back? Or is this a different one? I saw one take off—"

"The same one," Mullane answered coldly. "It returned the night after its departure, promptly on schedule."

"Hey! How long have I been out?"

Mullane's voice was patient.

"Two days, Temple. Now, please don't make it necessary for us to apply the beam again in order to avoid—"

"Cut it!" Temple shouted furiously. "What's this all about? What are you using that ship for? Where did it go?"

The rocket was flown to the moon by Dr. Rocossen," Mullane answered, after a momentary hesitation. "It carried a pre-fabricated launching cradle for the return journey and an air-tight landing depot shack. Beginning tomorrow, the ship will operate on a regular schedule, leaving here every fifth day."

Temple gaped in sheer amazement.

"Why? What is there on the moon? You certainly aren't doing all this just to start sight-seeing tours?"

"To transport the bodies of Crimson Plague victims to the moon for disposal."

"Plague victims?"

"Exactly. There is apparently no place on the earth or in the earth where the bodies may be placed beyond danger of the infection's spreading. And as long as the Plague spreads, medical science can't stop to dig into history for the Plague's origin or take the time to develop suitable combative measures.

"But if the spread could be at least checked, science feels that it could develop an antidote. We have found a way to check it—by transporting the bodies of Plague victims to the moon immediately, before they contaminate others.

There, insulated from earth by the airless miles of space, they are no longer a menace and the panic already growing in areas yet unattached will abate.

"TWO days ago, we communicated our offer to the government. Yesterday it was accepted. We have present facilities for transporting twenty-five bodies at a time and construction is started on a larger rocket with a capacity of two hundred. Within two months, the Plague should be halted."

Temple's head was swimming. He caught his breath with an effort.

"You mean you discovered the Plague before it started and moved here to work out this cemetery on the moon idea? Who's going to handle the victims?

"How do you keep from catching the Crimson Plague yourselves? If you've worked out a safeguard against it, why haven't you given that to the country?"

"We are all immune. Naturally immune. We are, therefore, taking turns collecting the bodies in our own trucks. That was a part of our generous offer."

"Where did the Crimson Plague come from, Mully? There is no previous record of it in medical history."

"It is a new and alien menace to earth, Curtis, from somewhere in outer space, brought by those meteors."

Temple's eyes flamed dangerously in the drawn grayness of his face.

"So that's it," he said sofely. "The Culwain Expedition cracked open a meteor and saw the Plague inside. They realized instantly what it would do to the world and that they themselves, out of a few billion people, were selected by Fate to be naturally immune.

"So they rushed here, called in other scientists to join their unselfish sacrifice, and built a rocket ship—a flying hearse to their cemetery in the sky. Is that correct?"

Mullane's answer sounded like a metallic purr.

"Exactly, Curtis. That is exactly the way it occurred."

Temple's lips curled away from his teeth. He leaned forward and barked one word.

"Nuts!"

Mullane's face was a blaze of cold fury. He started to wheel away.

"What do you take me for?" Temple roared. "A dope? How could you see microorganisms the best medical equipment in the world can't isolate? How could you know what they'd be or that you would be immune?

"And why treat me like a poor relation? So I'll run away and escape the Plague? That's what I'm supposed to believe, isn't it? Well, I've been exposed twice and I'm still here. Either I'm immune, too, or your Crimson Plague is as phony as your alibi.

"Maybe that's it. Maybe the Crimson Plague isn't bacterial at all. Are the bodies of earlier victims waiting around for weeks to be buried? Is there some secret action of the Plague that inhibits decay? Go ahead, Mully. Let's hear you explain that in your inimitable manner."

Mullane started to swing the peephole shut.

When no more than a slit remained open, he said coldly:

"Our first decision regarding your disposal was a mistake. I realize that clearly, now. However, a prolonged application of the blue beam will rectify that error perfectly."

The panel slammed shut, Mullane's angry footsteps drummed away and out of the building. There was no doubt that he was coming back with one of those paralyzing beam projectors almost immediately.

Temple must have hit too close to the truth—so close that his continued existence was a menace to the group. Nor did Temple have any illusions of again being permitted to recover from the ray.

Its touch now meant his finish, and the end of resistance to the group's mysterious purpose.

He had to escape—but how? The iron cot, the only movable object in the room, offered a crude weapon. Temple demolished it with a kick and wrenched off an iron leg.

Not that he actually expected a chance to use a club. Mullane needed only to open the panel and send the beam in through it. For that matter, it might penetrate the walls themselves. Clothing had offered no bar to its paralyzing touch.

The heap of blankets from the cot met Temple's eye, and a vague hope stirred. With desperate haste he ripped them into strips and knotted together a crude rope with a slip noose held open by a piece of spring wire from the cot. Then, using the cot frame for a ladder, he climbed up and poked the noose through the wire mesh ceiling above the door.

It was such a slender gamble. So many things could go wrong, and failure signed his death warrant.

Mullane's footsteps hammered back and halted outside. There was no sound of the panel being unlocked this time, and Temple's heart sank. He had to make Mullane open that.

"Mully," he called. "Hold on a minute. Maybe you're right and I'm wrong. Maybe I have been interfering with the one thing that can save civilization."

Temple's breath hissed out as the panel opened.

"Don't be childish," Mullane snapped, bending close to lift the black projector case. "You are only trying to stall me to save your own valueless life. It will not work."

Sweat came out on Temple's forehead. His right hand, beyond Mullane's line of vision, was desperately working the free end of his makeshift rope. In the opening, above the astronomer's unsuspecting head, the crude noose dangled too far forward to center above its objective. He had to make Mullane bend forward.

Temple deliberately stepped back out of sight.

"You can't escape, Curtis," Mullane cried and bent forward, shoving the projector into the opening.

"The heck I can't!" Temple barked and snapped his hand up. "Watch me."

The noose dropped over Mulane's head, the dislodged strip of spring dropped free and a jerk pulled the loop tight. At the same instant, Mullane's hand pressed the projector knob.

The blue beam missed Temple's head by inches and then winked out as Mullane dropped the projector to claw at the strangling line. Praying that the flimsy fabric would stand the strain, Temple wrapped the line around his fists and tugged.

He did not relinquish his hold until Mullane's struggles ceased and his hands fell away from his purpling throat. Then holding his victim erect by the taut rope, Temple reached out through the narrow panel, located the keys and let himself out.

Lowering Mullane's body, he tore away the strangling noose and felt for a heartbeat. It was there, faint but steady.

"You'll be okay," he grunted, "and some day you'll thank me for this, Mully."

HE locked the limp figure in his own former prison and then retrieved the fallen projector. If he survived to escape the camp, science would want to know the secret of that strange, paralysing blue beam.

Right now, escape was farthest from his thoughts. He had penetrated the camp but not the mysteries. Until Lee Mason was freed of the mysterious influence that had so changed her nature, he would not leave. But he had to find a hiding place until nightfall if he was to move about with any degree of freedom. He looked around the great hangar.

The rocket loomed above him, its cluster of giant stern jets deep in a metal-lined pit in the floor to confine the fierce heat of take-off blasts. Stubby elevator fins at each side rested on banks of rollers and a gangplank led up to a round closed port in the ship's belly.

Temple reluctantly tore his interest away from the big ship and sought a haven. His eyes fell on the closed outer door of the hangar, and he crossed to it. Holding his breath, he eased it open and peered out. For an instant, the sight that met his gaze froze him to immobility.

Night was falling and the street outside was heavy with shadows. Through those shadows came the whole expedition group, running in a grim bunch, clutching a variety of weapons. They were heading with ominous purposefulness straight at the hangar door.

Lee Mason led them, one of the deadly projectors in her slender hands. There was no question but that by some mysterious means, they knew of Temple's escape and were rushing to block his purpose.

CHAPTER X

Kidnaper

TEMPLE whirled and raced around the looming rocket toward another door that showed faintly in the far wall. He went through it as his pursuers burst in the hangar behind. He found himself in a narrow corridor lined with small laboratory cubicles and leading to an outside door at the end. Apparently each scientist had his own research room close to the rocket.

Head down, Temple raced for the distant exit. He was almost to his goal when feet scraped outside and the knob turned. Someone was coming in, blocking his escape that way. He turned and darted into the nearest laboratory.

From the maze of optical equipment, this room must belong to Lansdon, the chubby physicist. Temple's eye was caught by an odd instrument, like a grotesque stereoptican, sitting on the desk.

It bore the familiar double viewing apparatus, except that one lens was clear glass and the other completely opaque. The converging screen at the back was a film of some richly violet metal that Temple guessed might be caesium.

But there was no time to indulge scientific curiosity by probing further. The footsteps were approaching the door and the laboratory room bore no windows or other means of exit.

Temple took the only possible hiding place, the space below the laboratory bench. A moment later the steps entered the room.

He heard them advance a few paces and then stop. The sound of tense breathing reached his ears, and the muted rustle of clothing. Nerves crawled along his spine. There was something ominous in the deadly quiet. Then Lansdon's voice spoke.

"Come out, Temple. Come out from behind my bench. I know you're there and I have a gun trained on your heart."

Temple's breath hissed out. He touched the projector under his coat and then his hand dropped. He could not turn it on men who had been his friends and associates. For all he knew, this on might be set to kill at a touch of the blue beam. He sighed and climbed out.

The movement brought his eyes in line with the screen of the odd apparatus on the desk and for an instant he saw Lansdown's head and shoulders through that instrument. The sight froze him in gaping amazement.

The screen showed something alien and incredible—a ball of glowing violet luminescence clinging to the base of the physicist's brain, tight against the nape of his neck. It was like nothing Temple had ever seen before, simply a globule of pure radiance without form, shell or nucleus.

He looked around the screen and the thing was invisible. He looked back *through* the screen, and it was still there, pulsing quietly in hideous simulacre of life, invisible and unsuspected without the detector. Temple straightened and met Lansdon's furious eyes.

"You have seen too much," the chub-

by man whispered. "Now you must be destroyed at once."

The revolver in his hand lifted and flamed, a blasting thunder in the tiny room.

But Temple, forewarned by Lansdon's whitening trigger finger, was already plunging aside and away. The slug touched liquid fire to his ribs below his left arm. For an instant he stumbled, gasping.

Then he had his breath again, and the terrible urgency of his purpose poured fire into veins and muscles. There was only the single door, and Lansdon with his deadly pistol blocked that. Temple whirled and came up off his knees with his sound right shoulder up, and his head down.

HE struck the wall behind the desk with the force of a battering ram. Thin plywood and tarpaper gave way before his smashing impact. He plunged out into cool darkness, rolled over, felt the lash of sand particles in his face, driven by a pistol slug that missed him by inches.

Then he was up, running desperately, feeling the sting of fire in his shallow wound. Behind him, Lansdon shouted wildly, directing the others to race out and cut off the fugitive's flight. Ahead lay the road to the outer gate and freedom. . . .

Temple ran a dozen steps down this road, then swerved back toward the hangar. It was a crazy, suicidal move, but now that he knew so much of the terrible truth, his mind was fixed on one grim, desperate purpose. Near the hangar door, he froze into deep shadows and watched pursuit stream out to cut off his path to the outer fence.

His eyes grew colder as Lee Mason raced out, clutching the projector and a flashlight. Like a grim ghost, Temple drifted through the shadows in pursuit as she marched down one of the streets, whipping the light from side to side.

Gradually, as they drew near the edge of the camp, some of the tension went out of his nerves. Apparently whatever word power had revealed his presence before was now inactive for she gave no sign of sensing pursuit.

At the end of the street she stopped and flashed the light out toward the fence. When she turned back at last, Temple was waiting with arms outspread. He pounced like grim lightning.

One hand muffled her cry of warning while the other batted down the flashlight and projector. For a few moments she fought with the lithe strength of a panther, almost breaking the clutch of his weakened left arm a dozen times. He knew that he was doomed if she succeeded in raising one shout of alarm. There was only one alternative.

Temple's right fist came up and exploded against the slender jaw. She gasped and went limp in his arms. His face cold and emotionless, Temple scooped up the projector, slung her slender figure onto his shoulder and looked around. He was by no means free as long as that circle of deadly fence hemmed him in.

His eyes fell on the dark bulk of the parked University trucks. He ran to the first one and saw that the key was in the ignition lock. A moment later

[*Turn page*]

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he was in the truck, with Lee's limp form beside him, rocketing toward the gate.

The roar of the truck motor warned the rest of his intention. They must have telephoned ahead, for the gateman opened fire with a pistol when the truck was still some distance away. Lead spanged on the body and blasted glittering diamonds from a corner of the windshield, whipping dangerously close to Lee Mason's silent form.

Temple, his eyes cold, held the throttle down and drew out the captured projector. He leaned out the open window and thumbed the knob. Blue light beamed out, shifted and engulfed the guard. He crumpled to the ground.

A moment later Temple was out, throwing the master switch that opened the big gate. A touch told him the gateman was only paralyzed. Then the big truck was roaring out through the gate into the night, away from the yells and the shots and the licking tongues of blue flame that receeded in hopeless pursuit.

At the edge of Vingrove, Temple stopped long enough to find strong cord and tie Lee's ankles and wrists securely. Then he swung away from the town onto the highway that led northward and pushed the throttle to the floor.

LETTING the endless desert miles slip past, his mind probed at the new problems arising from his desperate gamble. He had Lee Mason, and he knew vaguely what was responsible for the change of personality, but he had no idea how to bring her back to normal. Yet until he could accomplish that restoration, she would be his bitter enemy.

Worse, he had no place to go. In the eyes of the law he was now a kidnapper and a car thief and Lee would be the first to condemn him if he were captured. If he tried to face the law with the incredible truth as he now knew it, he would be rushed to the nearest insane asylum.

Beside him, Lee stirred and moaned faintly. Temple instantly drew off the highway, cut the motor and bent over her. His fingers, probing the soft cloud of her hair, experienced the faintest of tingling sensations and he knew, then, that the thing he suspected was there.

Presently her eyes opened dazedly. She tugged at her bonds, then spat at him with an animal snarl of rage.

"Take it easy," Temple advised quietly. "I know what I'm up against, now, and I tied those ropes to stay. They'll stay until I've learned exactly what you are and how you can be destroyed. I'm not speaking to Lee Mason, now. I'm talking to you—the thing that has burrowed into her brain and enslaved her body to use as its active vehicle.

"I know you're there. I saw one of you or a piece of you on Lansdon's skull tonight, through his sub-visible detector. I know the glowing thing I saw changed him from a human being to a flesh and blood robot, and the same happened to Lee and the other scientists."

"You're insane," Lee hissed furiously, writhing and fighting the confining ropes. "I don't know what you're talking about. In case you've forgotten, Curtis Temple, the penalty for kidnaping is the electric chair."

Temple's eyes were terrible in their coldness.

"In case *you've* forgotten," he retorted through set teeth, "the penalty is no worse for murder. Lee Mason means more than life to me, and always will. But if I see that I'm going to be captured and my purpose blocked—I'll destroy this lovely shell of her before I'll see it go on to a lifetime of horrible slavery.

"Think *that* over before you try calling for help when we pass through some of these towns."

CHAPTER XI

Science at War

AT four o'clock in the morning, Temple parked on a dark residential street in Phoenix, opposite an imposing house. He knew that house well. Its owner was an old friend and former classmate, Allen Farge, now Professor of Physics at Mountain Tech.

Temple hated to draw anyone else in

on his problem, but he had to have refuge and a modern laboratory in which to work out the solution.

He shut off the motor and turned to Lee Mason.

"I'm leaving you alone for ten minutes," he said. "You're plotting ways to defeat me, of course, and you may succeed. Apparently you're possessed of Satan's own science. But remember this before you try anything. You tried to get into my brain the night Mullane was kidnapped and you failed.

"*You can't control me!* You know I'm a deadly menace to you but you can't read my mind to tell what I'm going to do or just how dangerous I really am.

"Your only chance to smash me is to stay close and try to catch me napping. That means controlling someone close to me, and no one will ever be closer than Lee Mason. Remember that when you think of harming her or moving your control to someone else."

He swung out of the cab, steeling his heart against the thought of leaving her there, bound and uncomfortable. His only solace was the realization that Lee Mason's own life and happiness hung in the balance.

Farge's house was dark and silent, but persistent ringing of the bell brought a blaze of lights. An ornamental lantern above Temple's head flashed on, and the square, homely face of Allen Farge squinted out through the door pane in sleepy irritation.

The irritation vanished at sight of Temple and the door whipped open.

"Holy boiled Mackerel! *Curt!* What are you doing out in this country? Out here for your health?" He squinted and made a face. "You look like a first class wreck going some place to happen. What you need is—"

Temple grinned wearily.

"What I need, Al, is a stiff drink about so-o-o high. And fix yourself one, too. *You'll* need it when you hear my story, fellow."

Farge grabbed his arm and pushed.

"Straight ahead to the kitchen, boy. The stuff is there, and I'll mix it in a washtub if you say the word."

They compromised on tall glasses, bickering amiably on measurements and proportions. But when the drinks were mixed, Farge seated himself across the porcelain table, and the laughter died out of his eyes.

"All right, Curt," he said quietly, "let's have it. You didn't come here on any social call. And there's a shadow of plain horror in your eyes. What's up?"

TEMPLE told him, beginning with the mystery of meteorites bombarding Kansas and covering everything that had followed the disappearance of the Culwain Expedition. At the mention of the Crimson Plague, Farge's lips thinned.

"I saw the Plague," he said harshly. You think those *things* caused that, too?"

"I'm sure of it—and just as sure bacteriologists can't find Plague germs because there aren't any germs." He rushed on, ignoring Farge's startled grunt.

"Look, they offer to transport victims to the moon, ostensibly for burial. How do we know that's their purpose? Suppose this is all a hellish pattern, a scheme to get human bodies to the moon for some ghastly use? Can you imagine a better way to accomplish it?"

Farge set down his empty glass with a shaking hand.

"Go on," he said hoarsely. "I'm crazy enough to keep on listening as long as you make two and two equal four."

He remained silent until Temple had finished, examining the black projector case without comment. Then he took a deep breath.

"Count me in, Curt," he said quietly. "I'll do anything for a chance to take this thing apart and see what makes it tick."

"You'll get that chance. Is your school out for the summer? I've lost track of time these past weeks."

"Closed last week—and twenty miles out of town I've got the finest private lab in the country, with everything in it but a rhumbatron, Curt. It's all yours. But what can you hope to accomplish?"

"We've got to duplicate Lansdon's detector that makes the entities visible.

Until we can see them, we're helpless. We can't fight them, can't analyze them, can't even perfect a weapon until we get that detector."

"Sweet job," Farge growled. "You don't know how it's made and by all the laws of physics, it can't exist, anyhow. You ought to have one of those entities, as you call them, for a guinea pig."

"I have," Temple said quietly, and described his kidnapping of Lee Mason.

Farge leaped to his feet, his chair crashing backward.

"My Lord! That poor girl tied up out there all this—"

"Easy, Al. That *poor girl* would slit your throat and mine the moment she got loose. That isn't Lee Mason out there. It's a hellish, inhuman thing that's usurped her body. God only knows if her real personality still exists.

"Maybe without the entity she'd die or—or have no mind left. I've tried not to think of that because we've got to go on, got to smash the plot behind all this—" his voice dropped, "regardless of cost."

FARGE gripped his shoulder a moment in silent sympathy.

"We'll fight," he said at last. "But what about us, Curt? What's to prevent an entity's seizing either of us?"

"In your case, nothing. They've tried to get into my brain and failed. Tonight I figured out why, and tomorrow I'll try to equip you with the same defense. Meanwhile, until I've got it ready, I don't dare tell you what it is.

"The big risk is that the entity will leave Lee and run away before we can accomplish anything, destroying her as a revenge blow against me. I've tried to block that, though my efforts are horribly feeble, Al.

"The main thing is speed and more speed. Can you get ready to go to your lab right away? I've seen those poor dupes at camp rushing their jobs and I know what we're up against in trying to beat them."

"Ready in ten minutes, Curt. My family's out of town so I haven't a single tie to hold me."

An hour later they stood in the finest private laboratory Temple had ever seen. A spare storeroom, hastily supplied with bed and dresser, became a comfortable but reasonably escape-proof prison for Lee Mason. Only a bank of steel shelves on one wall bothered Farge.

"She could rip those down and make a club of that metal edging, Curt," he protested.

"We'll risk it. I'm gambling that as long as the entity thinks it has a chance to smash us, it will stay quiet to watch our next moves. I'm deadly afraid of having it leave her now, maybe destroy her body in retaliation, and take up some new angle of attack we can't guard against."

He drove a clenched fist into his palm.

"Darn it, it's all guesswork, Al, and it scares me. How do I know I'm right? I thought I saw a ball of light on a man's head. On that thin base I've built up a whole beautiful theory —that might be utterly cockeyed.

"What is an entity? What are its powers? I've pieced odds and ends of evidence into a composite picture of them but how do I know it isn't a picture they deliberately created to fool me?

"Maybe that thing in there is communicating with its companions right now, planning some terrible attack. I don't *think* it is— but I don't know. It's all blind shooting in the dark."

"We've shot in the dark all our lives, Curt. We never saw an atom, yet we've built up a workable blueprint of its structure by which we can build them or tear them down. It's just another job of that kind. Let's sleep a couple of hours and get at it." . . . . .

Farge went to his room but Temple stayed behind, intent on some mysterious and urgent task of his own. In the dining room of Farge's living quarters he found a set of sterling silver dinnerware.

This he melted down in the electric furnace and moulded into a thin skullcap of pure silver. He handed the cap to Farge when he came back to the lab, rubbing his eyes.

"Wear this every moment, day or night," Temple said. "Unless my theory is way off, the entities can't get hold of your brain through a silver

screen. I've got one, holding the fracture at the back of my skull, and it's the only reason I can think of for my immunity."

"But why silver?" Farge demanded, donning it gingerly.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Temple admitted, "except that silver is opaque to ultraviolet radiations beyond 3,300 Angstrom Units. Maybe that's a clue to their makeup."

"It's worth trying," Farge agreed. "But how come, if the entities are so smart, they don't know that?"

"I think they do. They must. But the only chance they had to do anything about it was the two days I was a prisoner and during that time their attention was pretty well taken up with the return of the rocket and negotiations for funeral flights. Besides, there's no surgeon in their group and only a surgeon could remove my screen safely."

He handed over a rough sketch of the entity detector as he remembered it.

"It's a stereoscope," he told Farge, "that's built to superimpose an invisible image over the visible one to show them both in correct physical relationship. I'm positive of that.

The clear glass lens on the visible side won't give us any trouble. The black lens must have been of Wood's nickel oxide glass. That's a clue, because we know Wood's glass will transmit only ultraviolet light and filter out the visible rays. I have a feeling the real problem lies in the violet film that stood behind it."

Farge pondered, chewing his lip.

"Well, films of the alkali metals transmit shortwave light below the visible spectrum. But you say this film had a violet hue, which lets out lithium, sodium, potassium and rubidium.

They block all visible light and are therefore, a dead black. Caesium, the heaviest of that group, lets some visible violet pass, which gives it a violet color. But that sounds too easy, Curt."

"It's a starting point. We'll try all the alkali metals with every known type of fluorescent screen, Al, and see where we get."

Farge nodded eagerly.

"If we can get something besides X's to put in a formula, I'll solve it by mathematics, Curt. And while we're waiting for a Wood's lens and stock of alkali films, we can test for ultraviolet radiation. It may affect a photograph plate or emit measurable electrons or react on fluorescent pigments by direct bombardment."

They plunged enthusiastically into the myriad tests. Farge was optimistic but a worried frown creased Temple's forehead.

"Have you noticed how quiet Lee has been?" he asked, the second day after arrival at the laboratory. "She's stopped snarling and fighting and just sits there with a sort of sly smile on her lips while we put her through those tests. It's plain proof that we're so far from the right track that we aren't even worth worrying about."

"I've noticed it," Farge growled. "But one of these fine days we'll change that smile."

THEY plunged back into the endless quest. Temple said little, but always in the back of his mind was the haunting fear that maybe the entity had fled, leaving only a graven memory pattern on Lee's mind to direct her actions. Or maybe it was in touch with the camp, directing a smashing blow that might fall when they least expected it.

The radio brought ominous reports from the outside world. Apparently the entities had met his challenge by redoubling their deadly activities.

The Crimson Plague struck out with increased fury, spreading in widening circles to engulf major centers of population with horrible results. The toll of victims skyrocketed.

The funerary moonflights became daily affairs, and work was rushed on the second, larger rocket. New and faster trucks ranged the devastated areas, loading victims like cordwood.

A Vingrove woman was committed to the state insane hospital for insisting she had seen her husband, one of the earlier Plague victims presumably taken to the moon, alive and working at the camp.

Farge and Temple listened to the reports without audible comment but the lines deepened in their faces, and some-

how they managed to increase their efforts another notch. They cut sleeping time to three hours out of the twenty-four and ate only when weakness reminded them of the need for fuel on the fierce fire of their energy.

But at the end of the week they faced the grim truth.

"We've flopped," Farge said bitterly. "A week of trying everything without an inch of progress to show for it. We don't even know if the thing's still there.

"We can't see it, can't get a flicker of energy response on any indicator. We're right back where we started, Curt—nowhere!"

Temple, reeling from weariness and nerve strain, stared at the floor in silence. Abruptly he stiffened.

"Wait! I described the entity in terms of physical light and energy and we've been sticking to that basis."

"What else could it be?" Farge demanded dully.

"*Mental* energy. Biophysics has proved that thoughts are electrical—or at least produce measurable currents. The entity apparently merges itself with brain activities so why couldn't it be pure brain energy?"

"Gracious!" Farge looked startled. "But biophysics has *detected* mental and nervous currents. We can't get a response of any kind. And mind energy doesn't fall in the ultraviolet band, anyhow. It was a good theory, though."

"A *sound* theory," Temple barked, electrified by his new line of thought. "Look, a generator *produces* electricity—but it isn't electrical itself. Maybe the entity is the generator, without itself being measurable radiation.

"My theory would still hold, then. And as to the ultraviolet range, who knows where mind energy does lie? Or suppose that's part of a whole undiscovered energy spectrum, existing coincidentally with our familiar spectrum and only touching in the ultraviolet band? That's fantastic, of course, but I'm simply digging up theories that fit what facts we do know—and that fits."

"But try and prove it—or use it—with existing instruments or tools."

Temple was staring at the polished base of a bench lamp. He started abruptly.

"I just *did* prove it," he barked. "Quick! Lock Lee in her room and get back here. We're on our way."

Farge trotted back a few moments later, his eyes shining with excitement.

"You hit something, Curt. What was it?"

"The answer," Temple exulted. "I was watching the reflection of Lee's face when I suggested mental energy and an undiscovered spectrum. She nearly screamed. Her expression proves we're on the right track at last."

"But that's an unknown science, Curt. We don't know its fundamentals, we haven't any instruments—"

"Then we'll invent instruments," Temple roared. "You didn't find anything inside that projector except a gold grid in a sliding frame and a slab of some strange crystal—no batteries or generators of any kind.

"Nevertheless, the answer's there. I don't think that machine generates energy at all. I think it's a sort of burning glass proposition that concentrates natural energy from the atmosphere into a beam. We'll try doping it out on that basis.

"And there's one screen we've never tried. Element eighty-seven—Moldavium. It's one of the alkali metals but it's properties aren't known because it's never been isolated. Maybe the entities isolated it, and if they have, we can. Order a stock right away in the purest available form."

It was the following afternoon that Temple got his idea.

"*Cosmic rays!*" he suddenly roared at Farge in the midst of an experiment. "What a dunce I've been. That's the radiation that kills the entities. I'm positive of it!"

"But, I don't see. . . ." Farge gaped at him.

"Look, stones have been falling on Kansas for centuries, haven't they, with a concentration too great to be accidental. That implies intelligent bombardment, aimed there for a purpose. The obvious answer is—the entities. But no entities ever appeared before. Why?"

"You mean," Farge exclaimed, "that all the previous meteorites started out with loads of entities, too? Then why—"

In a burst of frantic horror, Temple struggled to his knees (Chapter XIII)

"Because the entities couldn't survive the trip through space. Something destroyed them—and the logical answer is the direct, unshielded impact of cosmic rays.

"This last swarm of stones were different from any that ever landed before. They were coated with a strange, heavy radioactive coating. Suppose that was some newly discovered shield against cosmic rays. That fits my theory and accounts for the entities' surviving."

"But, Curt, what can we do with it? We can't generate artificial cosmic rays. Their voltage is 'way too high. And we can't concentrate them except with a couple of hundred tons of magnets. How can—"

"That projector!" Temple barked. "If it can tap one range of free energy, maybe it can tap more. You've got a Wilson Cloud Chamber with a Geiger-Muller counter on it. Start shooting blasts of the projector into it and photographing for explosion trails. Change the setting of that sliding grid each time and see if you get a measurable response at any point."

As though Temple's ideas had supplied a key, the door suddenly swung open for them.

Two days later, on a film of semi-refined Moldavium, they saw a dull violet glow that moved when Lee Mason moved her head.

The entity!

The image was crude and it lacked the stereoscopic effect, but it gave them all they asked for. Now they could apply themselves to the discovery of a weapon.

Too tired to celebrate their first victory, Temple and Farge hung the photographic negatives of their latest Cloud Chamber shots up to dry and tumbled into bed without undressing.

And that night the entity struck back.

CHAPTER XII

Disaster

TEMPLE awoke some time during the night, bathed in cold perspiration, his lungs hammering for air and his nostrils aflame with stinging torment. He lay for a moment, gasping and blinking, watching what looked like an inexplicable parade of gray ghosts across the faint light of the window.

Then his brain suddenly threw off the dregs of sleep and filled with the horror of what he saw. He sprang out of bed, snatched open the hall door and staggered back from a solid wall of gray smoke that filled the corridor.

Fire! The place was on fire. There was not a sound to indicate whether or not Farge or Lee were alive or conscious.

With cold terror plucking at his nerves, Temple crooked his arm over nose and mouth for partial protection and fumbled his way down the hall to Farge's bedroom. A close-fitting door had kept the smoke out of that room and a gentle snore from the long cylinder of covers on the bed brought Temple a surge of relief. He sprang across and clutched Farge's shoulder.

"Curt, is that you?" Farge sat up, blinking and coughing. "What's hap—"

"Fire! I don't know where it started or how far it's gotten. I'm going to get Lee out. You try to save the instruments and negatives. Hurry!"

"Wait!" Farge stumbled to the bathroom and came back with two dripping towels. "This'll keep some of the smoke out of your lungs. Come on."

With the wet towels plastered over their faces, they stumbled downstairs through a solid tunnel of smoke. There were no sounds of fire, no ominous glow of flames.

With cold terror in his heart, Temple stumbled to the storeroom door and fumbled for the knob. It turned under his touch and slid away. Under his touch, the jamb felt jagged and rough. A grim suspicion flamed in his mind, then.

Light filtered through the pall of smoke as Farge found the switch working. By the glow, Temple saw the prison was empty, the door a wreck where sharp pieces of the smashed steel shelving had been used to gouge away the lock. Lee had done this, his mind pounded dully. She had smashed her way out, started the fire and fled.

Farge came stumbling through the smoke, a tangle of wreckage clutched in his arms. He was almost sobbing.

"Curt! The detector and projector—smashed into a million bits. Somebody—" he broke off, staring at the empty room.

"Come on," Temple plunged into the smoke, snatched a fire extinguisher and raced for the basement stairs. "Phone the fire department. Maybe we can hold it until—"

"Can't," Farge panted in his wake. "She ripped out the telephone and smashed it, too. We're cut off."

They found the fire smouldering in a pile of broken boxes heaped high against the wood steps of the basement. Twisted papers and shavings had laid the foundation for an inferno that would have been beyond control in another twenty minutes.

Temple took in the situation at a glance and thrust the extinguisher into Farge's arms.

"Take over. This was started so recently I may be able to catch her. I've got to—"

They both heard it, then—the wail of a car starter that broke abruptly into the explosive bark of firing cylinders. It came from just outside the house.

"The truck!" Temple shouting, plunging up the stairs. "She's getting away in the Culwain truck I brought from camp!"

HE burst out into the graying dawn to see Lee Mason in the truck's cab, racing the motor while she used both hands to mesh the cold-stiffened gears. The lever ground into place when he was still a hundred feet away. The truck lurched ahead.

Temple redoubled his speed. He made a desperate flying leap, and his fingers caught at the edge of the window frame. For a moment he clung, kicking for a foothold on the running board, buffeted by the jouncing of the accelerating truck.

Suddenly Lee Mason leaned out the open window. She was driving with one hand and her other clutched a spark plug wrench. The wrench was small and light but, driven by desperation, its impact against his jaw was stunning.

He reeled back, felt his slender grip torn loose. Then he fell to the ground with breath-taking force. Dimly he heard the roar of the speeding truck fade away into the distance and tried to stumble to his rubbery legs to follow.

Farge, racing out from the house, held him back.

"Easy, Curt," he soothed. "You can't catch her on foot and there isn't another car within miles. Why didn't I drive my car out instead of riding here on the truck with you?"

He led Temple into the laboratory and went around opening windows to clear the smoke. Then he vanished into the dark room.

Outside, a bird burst into sudden frantic song. It shocked Temple to realize, for the first time in weeks, that outside his tight little sphere of heartache and struggle there was still a world where birds could sing in the dawn. He dropped his face into his hands.

Farge, coming back, put a hand to his shoulder.

"It's losing Lee that hurts," Temple's voice came muffled through his hands. "Losing my chance to save her, now, when we were on the verge of success. Now she's not only beyond reach but she knows everything we've done and planned so she can beat us with one smashing blow."

"I hate to tell you this, now," Farge said tightly. "But I just looked at the last negatives and while I haven't had the time for Johnson asymetry measurements, I'd say we had something with an energy value well over five billion volts. That could only be cosmic rays, Curt. We—we had it—and now we've lost it, forever. There isn't enough of that projector left . . ."

"What?" Temple's head jerked up and his red-veined eyes were aflame. "Allen, I've got another projector, one I snatched that same night at camp. I've kept it hidden so the entity could never learn I had it through reading your mind. Quick, find out what setting you used and we'll start over again."

"Whoopee!" Farge yelled in a burst of relief. "And Curt, I stuck a scrap of surplus Moldavium away in the safe

last night. It's big enough for a very small detector."

"Fine. Fix one I can wear on my forehead like a visor, so I can see through it by simply tilting my head. That will leave my hands free to handle the projector."

"Curt," Farge's face was sober, "you can't buck that crowd alone, even with the projector. They've got guns, paralysis beams, and an absolute indifference to human life. You couldn't hope to face them all."

"I've got to," Temple said grimly. "Our last chance of getting any outside help or confidence is gone. You heard the radio last night. Three outstanding scientists publicly questioned the motives of the group in Arizona.

"And in each case, the scientist issued a retraction and apology within twenty-four hours. You know what that means. An entity seized each man. From now on, that will happen to anyone who stands in their way.

"It would take us weeks to persuade public figures to wear silver skull caps, and long before we succeeded, the entites would have struck a counter-blow.

"No, Allen, it's on our shoulders completely. Whatever is behind this horrible enfiltration of alien beings will only be stopped if *we* stop it.

"They've got the public behind them, now, by stopping the Crimson Plague wherever their trucks pick up the bodies. The whole nation is convinced that its future depends on the group at camp. We've got to strike first and justify ourselves afterward."

THEY worked for a time in silence. From the radio came frequent announcements, most of them dealing with either the Crimson Plague or the science group. No other news seemed of importance, for where the group trucks collected the bodies of victims, the Plague died out. Beyond the widening circle of their efforts, however, it raged unchecked.

"What's behind it?" Farge groaned. "You think the entities cause the Plague—but how? What do they want with bodies?"

"I'm positive, now, that they cause it," Temple answered grimly, "probably by some control of the victim's involuntary nervous system that induces hyper blood pressure and catalepsy.

"At the start, remember, they seized those farmers, the Solles and their hired man, to use as chauffeurs and kidnappers. When they were through with their dupes, they simply wiped out dangerous memories and discarded them.

"I think the Crimson Plague is a similar and more hideous type of recruiting which they've developed in order to supply themselves ordinary rough labor. I think it's only on scientists whose brains they need, that they bother with the type of mind-seizure we've met on Lee and the rest."

"Catalepsy?" Farge gasped. "You mean—"

"I mean I don't believe Crimson Plague victims are really dead. I believe an entity swoops down on a crowd, selects its victims and leaves them helpless, to be hauled away as slaves to more entities. That's the only way the pattern fits."

"But Curt, all those poor devils who were buried, cremated, autopsied. They were—"

"Murdered!" Temple snarled. "Murdered while an entity hovered close, waiting to strike again to convince a panic-stricken people that only transportation to the moon could check the Plague.

"And their fiendish plan has worked like a dream. The group has the public so sold on them as public saviors, now, that we'd be thrown in an insane asylum for suggesting the truth. Our only hope, now, is to smash the entities, get Lee and those others free of the control and then destroy the source of them on the moon."

Half an hour later, as Temple was fitting the completed detector over his head, Farge threw down his screwdriver and drew a deep breath.

"There it is, Curt. Identically the same adjustment of grid and crystal as I had in that other detector when I got the cosmic ray path in the Cloud Chamber. It won't take long to verify the physical accuracy." His face clouded.

"But Curt, have you thought of this? Even if we get what looks on our plates like cosmic rays, how can we be sure? We've already uncovered new energy

fields that we never knew existed.

"How can we know this isn't something utterly different—something that would instantly kill anyone it touched? You won't dare use the projector on Lee or those others without some kind of guinea pig test."

"There'll be a test," Temple said tightly. "It's my idea, my theory from the beginning. I'll be the guinea pig. If anything goes wrong, you'll have to carry on alone, that's all."

"But Curt, you can't risk that. An energy bombardment of five to ten billion volts might smash the brain cells, kill you instantly, or even destroy your mind. I won't let you risk that, boy. We'll get some lab animals, first, and—"

"There isn't time," Temple interrupted harshly. "Tomorrow night their big rocket starts hauling bodies. At any moment the entities may strike back at us. We can't waste days making lab tests now.

"The minute these plates are developed, I make the test on myself, and that's final. One life, more or less, doesn't count for much now, considering what's in the balance. If it works on me, I'm leaving at once."

From behind them, a quiet voice said:

"I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to leave, if I were you."

Temple and Farge whirled simultaneously and gasped.

JUST inside the laboratory door stood two young men with grim faces and sharp, watchful eyes. One of them cradled the ominous bulk of a submachine gun suggestively in his arms. The other held only a sheaf of folded papers.

Beside them stood Lee Mason, an expression of grim triumph on her face.

"What—who—" Farge gasped.

"Tillotson and Rowe," the man with the papers introduced them, "of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We have warrants here for your arrest on charges of kidnapping and unlawful detention of the person of one Lee Mason, who has sworn out warrants now being served. Will you come along quietly?"

Temple stood frozen, feeling the blood drain from his face. Lee had done this—not Lee, but the entity who controlled her. She had rushed to town after setting the fire and had organized this crushing blow.

Beside him, Farge suddenly straightened and threw back his head. His eyes were cold.

"This is either the beginning or the end," he said distinctly. "And there's only one way to find out. If this works, Curt, you'll know how to carry on. So long."

Before anyone could move to stop him, he lifted the untested projector and snapped it full in his own face.

"Allen!" Temple cried. "For God's sake, don't!"

His voice broke as Farge swayed and crumpled to the floor, the black case tumbling from his limp hands. Ignoring the menacing lift of the submachine gun, Temple dropped to his knees and lifted Farge's head. He saw the blank, relaxed features through a mist of pain and there was a dull roaring in his ears.

"Tilly, he did the Dutch right in front of us," cried Rowe. "But for cripe's sake, what with?"

CHAPTER XIII

Prisoners in Space

LEE MASON broke the shocked tension. She screamed shrilly and pointed a shaking hand.

"Get that thing! Grab it quickly! It's a horrible deadly weapon they've been working on. A death ray! It can kill!"

The FBI men were dazed and uncertain at the swift turn of events but Lee Mason was the complainant who had sought their aid. At her frantic cry, they both surged forward, intent on grabbing the mysterious case at Temple's side.

At that instant, Farge stirred. His eyes opened and his lips twisted into a smile.

"Success," he murmured softly.

The one word drove a blaze of new strength into Temple's numbed muscles. Farge was alive. The mysterious emanation of the projector, whether cosmic ray or not, whether destructive

to the entities or not, was at least not fatal.

Still on his knees, Temple whirled and snatched the projector from the clutching fingers of the two FBI men. His swift movement caught them flat-footed, with Tillotson still empty-handed and the submachine gun pointing at the floor. Before they could rectify the error, Temple tilted up the case and pressed the button.

There was no visible beam, no sound of unleashed power, but the two leaping figures stopped as though halted by a stone wall and tumbled into limp heaps. Lee Mason screamed in sudden terror and whirled toward the door.

Cold-eyed and tight-lipped, Temple levelled the projector a g a i n and snapped the catch. She fell in the doorway, crumpling without a sound.

And in the violet screen of the detector, still dangling over Temple's eyes, a glowing ball of violet light suddenly flared up and vanished in a single burst of intollerable radiance.

"Curt!" Farge bawled, scrambling to his feet. "You killed it! You destroyed it! I saw it for an instant with my naked eye—like a little cloud of glowing mist that whipped away. Curt, it works! We've won!

"We've lost," Temple barked," if we don't get out of here before these federal men wake up. They'd haul us in and keep us all locked up for weeks trying to get this thing straightened out. Come on. They must have a car."

He stooped, threw Lee Mason's limp figure over his shoulder and raced out with Farge at his heels. Outside, a powerful sedan stood in the driveway with motor purring softly.

Temple dropped Lee to the front seat cushions beside Farge and climbed under the wheel. An instant later the big car was roaring away from the laboratory at reckless speed.

"Where can you go?" Farge panted, twisting around to stare out the back window. "They'll be up and organizing a state-wide hunt within a matter of minutes. They'll block every highway . . ."

"There's only one place to go," Temple said through set teeth. "Straight to camp. We've got the detector and the weapon and temporary freedom.

"It will take these two at least half an hour to reach a telephone that works. By that time we can be past Phoenix and well on the way south toward Vingrove. There's no time to waste, now."

BETWEEN them, Lee Mason stirred and her eyes opened—eyes that were clear and bright and alive with the vivid spark of her personality.

"Curt!" she clutched at his arm with a little cry of happiness. "Curt, you freed me from that horrible slavery. Oh, Curt, you don't know how I watched you fight and prayed that you'd win, even though I couldn't do a thing to help you. But the ghastly things it made me do to you, while I was helpless."

She broke off with a sob at the anguished memories. Temple grinned happily, patting her hand. He had been horribly afraid of this moment of awakening, afraid that the entity would take a last revenge by wiping out Lee's mind or memory.

But apparently destruction had come so swiftly and unexpectedly that the entity had had no time for venegance. Her mind seemed completely free and clear.

"Forget it all, honey. Forget the whole thing. It's over, now, and before morning we'll have the others free, as well. Wear this cap every moment, day and night, and they can never seize your mind again." He handed over a duplicate of the silver cap he had made for Farge. "I've carried this a long time, waiting for a chance to use it. Now meet the bravest and swellest friend who was ever put on this earth."

Lee turned and laid a hand over Farge's.

"I know," she said softly. "I watched you, too. What you did back there, risking your life or more to try that untested projector."

Farge reddened uncomfortably and interrupted the praise with a sudden fit of coughing. Temple grinned and rescued him.

"Lee, tell me about the entities—everything you can that will help us defeat them. Where did they come from? What are—"

"But Curt, I can't. That's the horrible part of it. I never did know what

was really happening. That night at camp, I felt something icey digging into my brain. Then everything went black and when I awoke, I felt normal again except that I couldn't command my own body any more.

"I could *think* something I wanted to say but I couldn't say it. I could plan places to go and things to do, but I couldn't do anything. Nor could I stop myself from doing the things I did do."

"Then you couldn't feel the entity as —as a personality?" Temple demanded, his eyes showing his disappointment. "You had no sudden rush of additional knowledge or."

"Not a thing, Curt. I made one of those projectors—as we all did—but my brain simply couldn't figure out what my own hands were fashioning, nor why. The only time I really felt the *thing's* presence was a time or two when problems had to be worked out mentally.

"Then I started thinking about the problem in response to some command I couldn't analyze or resist and suddenly a whole flood of energy would pour into my brain. My thought-processes would speed up until I actually couldn't keep up with them—and then suddenly, out of the spinning jumble, would come the answer."

"I thought so," Temple muttered. "Pure mental energy, Allen, as we figured. But Lee, when you talk to one another about the affairs of the entities, is your conversation simply—"

"Exactly the same," she interrupted. "Words flash into my mind, and I speak them without knowing why or, often, what they mean. But I think the entities also converse with one another by some psychic means, too.

"Often a group of us would stand together for hours without moving or speaking a word, but I'd get a feeling of thoughts fairly flying through the air around us, and suddenly everyone would rush off on some new project."

"Then," Farge demanded, "you haven't any idea what their purpose is? You don't know why they invaded the earth?"

"I haven't any idea. But," she shivered uncontrollably, "I have a feeling it's horrible, ghastly."

It was not until late afternoon that they ran into the grim manhunt organized by the FBI. A few miles north of Vingrove they raced over a hill and faced a trap. A state police coupe was parked on the pavement, narrowing it to one lane, and two uniformed patrolmen flanked a huge portable stop sign that blocked the rest of the highway.

"Duck low," was all Temple said. "We can't be stopped now."

He slowed deceptively, then jammed the throttle to the floor. The heavy sedan leaped ahead like a living thing in a roaring surge of unleashed power. There were startled yells, a splintering crash, the grinding impact of steel on steel.

THEN they went through, racing down the highway with one fender flapping and the speedometer needle near the hundred mark as lead thudded futilely into the back of the sedan. Behind them, a wrecked barricade, an overturned police coupe and two khaki-uniformed wild men vanished into distance.

They wheeled into the road to camp shortly after dusk and joined a procession of vehicles of all kinds jamming the trail. Temple pulled up beside a man changing a tire and leaned out.

"Where's everybody going?" he asked.

"Gonna watch the new rocket take off at nine o'clock," his informant grunted. "They set the first trip ahead a day and everybody's out to see it from the hills."

"Come on," Temple sent the sedan leaping ahead, bouncing over the hard-packed sand to avoid the traffic on the trail. "There isn't a moment to lose if we want to save some two hundred poor Plague victims from slavery."

A short distance from the gate, he stopped the car, and he and Farge climbed into the back, crouching on the floor while Lee slid under the wheel. Temple held the projector ready.

"It's up to you," he whispered grimly. "Try to make the gateman shut off the current and open the gate for you. If we can get in without raising an alarm, our chances of success are infinitely better than if we have to crash the gate and face a pitched battle."

He adjusted the angle of the detector on his forehead and patted the flat case of the projector.

"If an entity comes to investigate, I'll handle it."

"I should be able to put it over," Lee said tightly. "Lord knows, I've had enough practise."

She stopped the sedan close to the gate and leaned out as a surly, beetle-browed guard appeared.

"Jonas," she snapped, coldly imperious, "the gate at once. I have just escaped my captors and have important news."

In the rear, Temple and Farge held their breaths as only silence answered.

"Curt," Lee whispered suddenly, her voice ragged. "What's wrong? All he does is stand and stare without moving. Did—"

Temple raised up for a quick glance and his breath caught.

"Easy, Sweet. There are two free entities floating this way to investigate. His own is still in his brain, waiting for their report. I'll have to shoot."

He lifted the projector and they all saw the twin wraiths of glowing mist that suddenly appeared and then whipped away as the terrible bombardment destroyed their alien atoms.

Simultaneously, the gateman yelled and whirled toward the camp phone inside the guard booth. He had almost reached his goal when a blast from the projector destroyed the guiding entity and sent him sprawling.

"That means open war," Temple snapped. "Everybody out."

As they leaped from the car, he slid under the wheel and sent the heavy sedan lurching back. When he judged he had sufficient run, he slammed it forward and jerked the dash throttle wide open. The big limousine thundered across the sand, bearing down irresistably on the steel mesh gate.

Twenty feet from the gate, Temple jumped. He struck the sand and rolled over and over, arms shielding his face. An instant later the sedan smashed headlong into the barrier.

There was a blaze of searing, roaring high tension flame that momentarily engulfed the car. Then the flame died, the gate went down with a crash and alarm bells burst out from the heart of camp. Temple sprang to his feet as Lee and Fargo raced up.

"Stay here, you two," he snapped. "You wouldn't stand a chance in there without a weapon. I'll handle things."

"Nuts to you," Lee panted cheerfully. "Allen has his tools and he says he can convert any paralysis gun into an entity-destroyer, now, in five minutes. Get going. It's almost eight-thirty right now."

THERE was no time to argue. Temple fought down the quick stab of fear for her safety and hurdled the wrecked gate. Behind him, Farge snatched a paralysis projector from the sprawled gateman and dug at it with eager fingers as he ran.

Ahead, a knot of men burst from the camp and raced toward them down the road. A gun slammed, and lead whistled over their heads. Temple tried a blast of the projector but the distance was still too great. More shot came, uncomfortably close.

"Stay here," he pleaded between panting breaths. "They haven't any compunction about shooting to kill."

Their answer was an added burst of speed that carried them, dodging and twisting, straight into the hail of lead from the advancing guards. Temple groaned and tried the projector again without any great hope. The range was still extreme.

But miraculously, this time there were bursts of violet and the figures pitched to the sand and lay sprawled and still. It was grotesque, a slaughter without bloodshed, a mock carnage. Temple hurdled the still forms with Lee at his heels. Farge stopped for a quick search of the bodies, then caught up with them, panting.

"No paralysis projectors," he gasped. "Seems odd."

"I know why," Lee panted the information. "They only had—five crystals. Curt—stole two projectors—that night. Only three—left."

Temple's eyes were on the looming bulk of the new rocket hangar, dwarfing the old structure, poking the silvery snout of its monstrous burden toward the waiting sky. To him it was a symbol—the symbol of countless thousands of Plague victims, living dead, who

They raced across the crater floor, using light lunar gravitation to increase their speed (Chapter XVI)

would be doomed to lifetimes of slavery if he failed. He must not fail.

Suddenly his eyes widened and his steps faltered. The silvery nose of the projecting rocket was reddening, glowing with reflected flames, and the still night air was carrying a faint mutter of distant thunder to his ears. He choked.

"The rocket," he groaned. "It's taking off!"

His words were drowned in the titantic thunder, his eyes dazzeld by the incredible brilliance of the great ship's take-off. He saw it, riding the curving scimitar of the flames up into the stars. Then it was gone and the three of them stod gasping, stunned.

After a moment they broke the spell and raced on. They burst into the main camp street and a blue beam licked at them from the shadows. Temple fired a burst from the projector and an entity flamed to death in the darkness. Farge snatched another paralysis projector from the sprawled figure as they ran past.

Suddenly Dr. Eno Rocossen burst from a shack ahead of them and ran madly toward the smaller rocket hangar. He carried a projector but made no effort to use it, all his energies concentrated on flight.

"*Stop him!*" Temple roared. "If he gets the small rocket away we're licked. They can stay on the moon, beyond our

reach, and whip those hundreds of Plague victims into an army for some new invasion."

Staggering, gasping, every breath a flaming agony, they pounded doggedly on, cutting down the distance. Temple lifted his projector and then let it fall. He couldn't risk blasting Rocossen's entity, destroying the knowledge of how to operate and guide the rocket.

SUDDENLY their way was blocked by a knot of figures plunging into the street ahead of them, cuting them off from their quarry. There was Jacobs, pistol in hand; Mullane, Davoe, Meeker, Lansdon, raising a paralysis projector.

Temple rayed down Lansdon and Jacobs in two bursts. Then the others were on them, swinging clubs and fists in wild fury.

"They're trying to cut us off," Farge howled, slugging toe to toe with Meeker. "We'll hold them, Curt. Get through and stop Rocossen."

Temple drilled in, sent Davoe reeling and flashed down the stret. Rocossen was just vanishing into the smaller hangar.

Desperately Temple increased his speed. It was obvious the rest had fled to the moon on the big rocket.

If Rocossen got away, all hope of contact would be cut off. Human brains could never hope to duplicate the moon fights in time to smash another invasion attempt.

Temple burst into the hangar and saw Rocossen darting up the gangplank toward the open port of the waiting craft. He roared a command to halt. Rocossen faltered at the sound and swivelled a contorted face to glare at his pursuer. The paralysis gun leaped up and flamed.

Temple tried to dodge, slipped and felt the beam's searing touch against his left arm and side. He stumbled, plunged forward onto the foot of the gangplank and heard his projector clatter from numbed fingers into the depths of the rocket pit.

Weaponless, his left side numb and useless, Temple sprawled precariously on the narrow gangplank as Rocossen vanished into the ship. A moment later hydraulic pistons gurgled to the rising whine of machinery from somewhere inside.

Under Temple, the gangplank shifted and swayed. Pistons were inexorably drawing the great port lock into its seat, dislodging the gangplank. In a moment plank and its living burden would slip free to plunge to the pit below—into a hell of seething flames when the take-off rockets blasted.

With sweat pouring down his face, Temple clawed his right hand into the iron gangplank and inched himself ahead toward the narrowing port. He had to get inside, had to stop Rocossen before the rockets fired. The closing port was still six feet away.

A scant inch still held the gangplank in place.

Behind him, Farge and Lee burst into the hangar with the three scientists fighting and clawing to hold them back. They took in the situation at a glance. Farge swung around, blocking the doorway, battling desperately to hold his ground as Lee broke free and raced toward the rocket.

On the gangplank, Temple saw the last half-inch of overlap between gangplank and rising lock narrow inexorably. He clenched his teeth, dragging his helpless body another six inches. Behind him, someone flashed up the teetering plank, caught at his shoulders and literally hurled him across the remaining gap and through the closing port to the rocket's floor. He saw Lee Mason, panting, grining at him through bruised lips as she rested on hands and knees from her last desperate dash.

Then the gangplank crashed away outside, the pistons wheezed sharply and the great lock chugged into its seat. Simultaneously, deafening thunder burst around them and the floor beneath them quivered. In a burst of frantic horror, Temple struggled to his knees. He had to get forward, stop that take-off.

The rockets' roar deepened. Under him the floor leaped violently and some titanic, irresistable force plucked them up and hurled them back along a shadowy coridor. Temple knew one instant of blinding agony, then a terrific impact smashed the breath from his lungs and the consciousness of failure from his brain.

CHAPTER XIV

Master of the Moon

TEMPLE awoke sharply with the salt taste of blod in his throat, a numbing agony through his bruised body and a cold terror in his heart. Lee —Lee Mason! She had rushed in to help him. The terrible acceleration of the take-off had hurled them toward the rocket's tail with unbearable force, enough force ot smash a human body to pulp.

His eyes opened dully, widened incredulously at what they saw. The entire rear bulkhead of the rocket was covered by a great, thick mat of some resilient material, bolstered by heavy coil springs, and it was against this life-saving cushion that they had been driven.

He saw Lee's slender figure beside him, still pressed tight against the padding, her lashes fluttering against waxen cheeks as consciousness returned.

With a prayer of thankfulness, Temple pushed himself erect to reach her side. The slight effort he exerted shot him up like a jack-in-the-box and left his bruised body floating gently in mid-air. Temple's breath caught.

They were already beyond Earth's gravity field, blasting through outer space. Behind and around him, the steady thunder of the rockets was driving them further and further from Earth—further from hope.

"Curt," it was Lee, her eyes wide and startled. "What—how—oh, we're outside gravity." She pushed herself out into the air beside him, laughing shakily.

"What a funny feeling, not to weigh anything."

Temple caught her hand with a groan of anguish.

"Lee! Lee! Why did you jump inside? You should have pushed me in and run back. There was time—"

"Huh!" she snorted, crinkling her nose in a grin. "And lose you just when I got you back? Don't be silly. Besides, how do I know but what some moon hussy might not vamp you?

"It was a full moon, I remember, that got you to propose to me that night." Her face sobered. "But it was a dirty trick to leave Allen to fight those three alone."

"Don't worry about him," Temple said grimly. "He was amateur boxing champ at college for two years. Besides, he had his projector almost set for cosmic ray emission. If you—"

He broke off as the thunder of rockets suddenly died away from the stern. Then a shudder rippled through the craft as new explosions blasted more faintly from the bow.

Lee clutched at his arm. She was frightened.

"Curt! What's happening?"

"We're getting close to the moon," he answered soberly. "It sounds as if we're turning a somersault in space. The rocket is built to land stern-first so it has to be turned around for the blasts to work as brakes. I think those are steering jets we hear now—which means in a few minutes we'll be half-crushed by deceleration."

"But what can we do?"

"Not much," he said. "You stay here, tight against the cushion. I'm going forward and see what's what."

As he spoke, the thunder of rockets burst from the stern again and invisible force drove them back against the big pad. Smaller shocks from the sides indicated that the dropping craft was being jocked toward landing position. A sense of awe filled Temple at the incredible ingenuity that had created this controllable monster in so short a space of time.

Fighting the drag of deceleration, feeling the first faint pull of lunar gravity, Temple fought his way along the dimly lighted corridor toward the bow. He could tell, now, that the rocket was dropping stern first at an acute angle. Eventually the ship would swing to full vertical for the final drop and the check-blasts would, in those final minutes, be as terrible as the take-off. Unless he were braced and cushioned, he would be smashed to pulp against the metal bulkheads.

The corridor was narrow and low, lined with countless small sliding doors and roofed with an odd tarry substance that glowed with faint radioactivity in

the dim light. This was probably the same material that had coated the meteorites, a shield against cosmic rays.

Dragging himself forward by the hand-rail, Temple reached an open door at the corridor's end and peered into the small control room. His eyes widened in amazement.

ROCOSSEN was strapped in a great, webbed seat, thickly padded and suspended from heavy coil springs in front of the control panel. His slender hands rested on a small bank of levers, like the throtles on an air transport, with which he was delicately directing the steering and braking blasts. Temple watched tensely, noting which levers were moved, and listening to the location and intensity of the resulting blasts. Gradually the picture of the rocket's control was forming in his mind.

In front of the astrogator, a large television screen flashed a swelling image of the pitted moon while a smaller screen beside it showed the red-haloed globe of the dwindling Earth. A lump rose into Temple's throat at the sight.

Rocossen jockeyed the steering blasts until the massive crater of Plato lay squarely under cross-hairs on the screen. Temple stared at the airless, alien world, seeing the nearby pits of Eudoxis and Cassini, the mighty Caucasus, Carpathian and Teneriffe Ranges jutting like monstrous teeth around Mare Imbrium.

Southward, the peaks of the Dorfel and Leibnitz Mountains broke the horizon. How often he had studied the dead panorama through the telescope, but this was different. There were the weird colors in Plato's depths, colors that had mystified astronomers for years, and a queer diffusion of the sharp sunlight as though air were present.

Suddenly the thunder of stern tubes and the terrible force deceleration awoke Temple to his own danger. He glanced around and saw the rear wall of the control room padded and cushioned as the stern had been. Apparently this was extra safeguard in case of emergency. Temple slid to the cushion and clung there.

The stern tubes were firing steadily now, and the deceleration hammered his body against the bulkhead with crushing fury. Blood misted his vision, hammered in his ears and rose saltily in his throat. Lifting his diaphragm for each gasping breath was a titanc effort. Only constant frantic swallowing kept his eardrums intact against the crushing pressure.

On the vision screen the crater swelled to fill the plate, and a black dot in its center became a squat domed hangar with gaping roof waiting to receive them.

Then miraculously the slowing fall was easing the pressure and Temple could see and breathe again. The maw of the hangar filled the screen, and inside it, a tangle of framework showed faintly. The framework leaped upward and became a funneling arrangement of beams that guided the projectile to its cradle.

Metal grated suddenly against the hull. The rockets spurted and die, giving way to the sobbing wheeze of hydraulic cushions easing the great shell into its pit.

In the thundering silence that followed, Dr. Eno Rocossen snapped the last switch and leaned back. His fingers opened the catches of the great webbed safety belt that held him in the navigator's seat.

They had landed on the moon!

WITH that knowledge flaming in his brain, Temple staggered erect, reeling dizzily, his body throbbing with dull pain. He wanted nothing so much as to lie down on the metal floor and close his eyes but a numb desperation kept him erect.

Rocossen, clambering to the floor, saw him then and his expression whipped from incredulity to blazing triumph. He snatched at a paralysis projector sheathed beside the seat.

"I thought you were finished," he snarled, "but this is better. Now Monj himself can enjoy your conversion to our project. March back to the port, Temple."

He centered the projector menacingly with one hand while the other reached toward the plunger that operated the lock pistons. His lips curled in a mocking smile.

Temple hesitated, swaying. There was an elusive thought scurrying through his numbed mind, something he ought to remember—something that might mean his salvation, and Lee's. He groped for it desperately as Rocossen's thumb tightened on the paralysis trigger.

Suddenly the elusive memory smashed into his brain with an impact that drove away the numbing clouds. He straightened, smiled grimly—and walked toward Rocossen.

"Go ahead and blast me, Rocky," he invited tightly. "But where will your little plaything get its power? Not from the free energy radiations outside, because your ship is insulated against those rays—"

With a snarl of baffled fury, Rocossen hurled the useless projector at Temple's head and whirled to tug at the lock control. Dodging the missile, Temple lunged forward, dragging Rocossen's hands from the lever. They went down, squirming and fighting.

"Hold him, Curt!" Lee darted in, waving a silver liquor flask that was battered almost beyond recognition. "One good sock with this should take the fight out of him." She grinned at Temple's surprise.

"I peeked in one of those doors, and there was a Plague victim strapped in a padded hammock and *this* smashed against the wall. It was all I could find for a club so I grabbed it."

"Wait!" Temple pinned Rocossen with his knees and stretched a hand. "Is there anything in it?"

"Sure." Lee sniffed the cap. "Whiskey. But this is no time—"

"Give!" Temple's eyes blazed. "Alcohol affects the brain, and it might make the job of controlling tough for an entity. As I remember it, Rockey's system never could stand much liquor."

He forced gulps of the amber liquid between Rocossen's set teeth and forced him to swallow by pinching his nose. The astronomer strangled, shrieked and suddenly went limp.

TEMPLE jerked down the battered remnants of the detector still straped to his forehead. In the bent screen he saw the entity jerk free and dart erratically away down the corridor. Rocossen suddenly groaned and tried to sit up.

"Curtis! Miss Mason! You've freed me at last from that terrible power. Oh, to think that I, a doctor of philosophy and fellow of the—"

"Forget it," Temple soothed, helping the shaken astronomer to his feet. "You had illustrious company in your shame. But right now we've got bigger worries. You've made this trip often. Can you remember what we'll be facing outside when that port is opened?"

Rocossen groaned and his face blanched.

"Slaves—hundreds of poor, helpless devils like myself. Huge, glowing caverns, horrible monsters from another world, and the feeling of thousands of malignant beings filling the air, intelligent, yet invisible."

"Nice picture of our future," Temple grimaced. He squared his shoulders. "Well—"

"Curtis!" Rocossen clutched his arm. "You're not going out there—not planning to face *them*—"

Temple's face was cold.

"We'll have to face them sooner or later—here or after they seize the Earth. We can't run away now. Before we could get back home, persuade people we weren't crazy and organize an attack, they could overwhelm the country with the big rocket.

They might shoot thousands of entity-laden rocks at Kansas, send hundreds of human slaves in the other ship, destroy this base so we couldn't ever land on the moon again to fight them."

"I see," Rocossen stiffened grimly. "We shall do what we can, as long as we can. Lead on, Professor Temple."

"Bravo!" Temple handed the nearly empty flask to Lee. "Pour it down, sweet—every last drop."

"Me?" She gaped at him. "Why should I?"

"Because," he expalined patiently, "the first thing they'd do would be to yank off your silver cap and seize your brain again. I'm banking that as long as alcohol fumes are rising you'll both be given a wide berth by the entities."

As she coughed down the fiery liquor, Temple jerked the wood railing from the wall and broke off three sturdy clubs. Then he pulled the piston con-

trol lever to its farthest limit.

The pistons gurgled softly and fell into a steady, rhythmic chugging. The great round lock crept out of its seal to reveal a short section of tunnel leading off to a lighted area.

Then, as the gap widened, he saw that the tunnel was actually a telescoping metal tube that met the rocket hull in an air-tight seal, forming a passage through the roofless, airless hangar to the main depot. It was, he realized, an ingenious device for eliminating intricate airlocks or space suits.

Temple peered down the passageway. He could see no living beings at the far end but the screen of his detector was afire with the glow of countless drifting entities, hovering, waiting. His nerves felt cold.

Rocossen suddenly slapped him on the back.

"That whiskey was excellent stock, Curt, old boy. I feel exhilarated—definitely exhilarated. Ha!"

Lee Mason giggled, and a burst of crazy laughter welled up in Temple's throat. Rocossen was getting more than protection from his enforced drinks. Fortunately there had not been enough left to effect Lee's cortex.

"Bring on your ol' en'ities," Rocossen hiccuped, shaking his club. "Le's go se ol' Monj himself, ol' boy, ol' boy."

"Monj?" Temple gaped at him. "Who is Monj?"

Rocossen leered owlishly.

"Monj? He'sh the big cheese. Mashter of the Moon. But I c'n lick him. C'mon!"

Before either Temple or Lee could stop him, he bounded into the tunnel and swaggered toward the distant light.

CHAPTER XV

The Doom of Perfection

TEMPLE groaned and leaped in pursuit with Lee at his heels. Ahead, Rocossen reeled out of the tube into the brighter light and stopped short, the club dropping from his hands. Temple and Lee burst out beside him a moment later and skidded to a startled halt, gasping, stunned.

They were inside a low, sprawling dome lined with the same obsidian-black radioactive substance that had coated the meteorites and shielded the rocket's interior. To their right, purring machinery bulked huge behind metal screens. To their left, a huge archway revealed a cyclopean, glowing passage that slanted down out of sight into the very bowels of the moon.

Overhead, glowing rods like fluorescent light tubes, supplemented the greenish radiance of the shimmering walls. Far to the side, Temple saw the outline of a heavy door with the bulbous shapes of six metallic space suits suspended from the curving wall beside it.

All this background Temple saw in a single sweeping glance before his stricken gaze riveted on the weird actors who occupied this nightmare stage. Ranged around half the wall before them stood row on row of human beings, incredibly stiff and motionless, staring at them with dead blank eyes.

Before this army of the living dead stood three men, the center one a tall gaunt man whose brain bore the most gigantic entity Temple's detector had ever revealed. He did not need Rocossen's awed whisper to know that he was face to face with the leader of the entities — Monj, the Master of the Moon.

But what brought the startled breath to Temple's lips was the circle of monstrous shapes that came slithering out of the shadows from both sides to surround them. For a moment he was too stunned to breathe. Lee Mason's fingers tensed, biting into the corded muscles of his arm.

"The Vards!" Rocossen murmured, shrinking back. "The Vards!"

There were seven of the creatures, like seven grotesque sea monsters out of their native element. Leathery, bulbous bodies that were both head and trunk, sprouted ten sinuous, writhing tentacles. Four of the tentacles, thicker than the rest, terminated in round sucker-discs that gripped the floor as legs. The remaining six tentacles were spaced around the body as arms.

With an eerie, gliding shuffle, the seven creatures drew together surrounding the three humans in a wide

circle. Arm tentacles writhed out and gripped one another, forming a network of interlocking living bars around them.

Temple gasped aloud, not at the weird creatures or their action but at the definite impression of intelligence that lurked in their huge saucer eyes. Alien the creatures might be in form, but there was thinking, reasoning intelligence in their luminous eyes.

His guess was confirmed by the presence of a glowing entity on the back of each bulbous head-body. He felt certain the entities could not utilize hosts without intelligence, since their power seemed to lie in intensifying knowledge already present in a controlled brain, rather than by implanting new knowledge.

The fact that the entities sought out trained scientific minds on earth indicated their need for at least a foundation of established thought patterns. He thought it probable that the entities, by supplying the brain with a limitless flow of pure mind energy, could stimulate its activity to supernormal heights *along already established channels.*

THE presence of the weird creatures cleared up another question in Temple's mind. It explained how vaporous beings, lacking physical bodies, could have constructed the crude stone "space ships" and hurled them at the earth.

Lee pressed close to him, shuddering.

"Curt, what are they? Do you suppose they're the native inhabitants of the moon, enslaved by the entities?"

"I doubt it. These Vards, as Rocossen called them, don't appear to be physically adapted to lunar extremes of heat and cold, and they're obviously oxygen-breathers. But we'll probably find that and a lot of other unpleasant things out soon enough. Stick close to me every moment."

His detector screen showed the vast dome of the building packed with countless multitudes of the entities, hovering watchfully. Others were ranged along the wall while still others poured into the tube behind them, obviously to revive the new victims brought by the small rocket.

Temple groaned aloud. How could they ever hope to smash a menace whose vast forces were invisible, omnipotent and well-nigh unconquerable?

As if in response to a silent command, the circle of Vards suddenly moved ahead, forcing their encircled captives closer to the figure of Monj and his companions. Rocossen shuddered and swung a white, strained face toward Lee and Temple.

"Oh, Lord!" he whispered tightly. "To think I trafficked with these monstrosities only a short time ago. I remembered all this vaguely, but they look hideously different, now that I'm back in my right mind."

The figure of Monj stirred.

"Silence," it thundered. "Slaves do not whisper in the presence of the Master."

Anger blazed in Temple's eyes. He took a quick step forward, gripping his makeshift club.

"Just a minute," he snarled. "We aren't your slaves and we don't intend to be. You made a pretty good start toward invading and ruling the world, but right now, mister, you're facing three people you can't invade and rule."

Monj stiffened, and the Vards shifted warily, staring. For an instant Temple sensed a network of flying thoughts weaving in the air about him. Then Monj spoke, his voice puzzled.

"Invade and rule your world? Why should we try to do that? We don't want your poor, sterile globe with its alien life-forms. What glory could we find in ruling races who, beside our science, are little more than savages?"

It was Temple's turn to stare, open-mouthed.

"I don't believe you," he snapped, then. "You certainly went through all the motions of invasion and our poor *savage* races seem to have done fairly well in supplying you with brain-power.

"Personally, I think you're some feeble outcasts from some other world who hope to run a bluff and get yourselves set in a new, easy life where you can stead true ability and claim it for your own."

HE deliberately loaded his voice with sarcasm. The figure of Monj was already trembling with raging fury and Temple was cooly fanning that rage. If he could goad Monj into blow-

ing up completely, the entity might unintentionally reveal a clue to the mystery. Fantastic as it seemed, Temple actually believed that invasion and conquest was not the true purpose of the entities.

There was another crackling silence. Then the anger went out of Monj's face, replaced by calm deliberation. After a moment he nodded.

"Very well. You shall know the truth. Perhaps the reactions of your race to our problem may yield us an unpected clue.

"Relax and let your mind receive thought-pictures of the story that will be projected by our greater energy onto the curtains of your minds. Do not be afraid. You are quite safe from seizure until the story is told."

Then he began to speak softly and vibrantly while Temple's stunned mind carried him up among distant stars and showed him weird, incredible scenes with a vividness that touched every emotional chord in his being. He saw by the expressions on the faces of Lee and Rocossen that they, too, were sharing his visions.

"Our home lies eons away in space on Xacrn, ninth planet in the solar system of the faint star you call Seventeen Leporis," Monj began, and Temple's mind flamed through the awful vastnesses of space to an alien, incredible world of indescribable life-forms and unnameable colors.

"We are Xacrns, the ultimate evolutionary form of the highest life order in the cosmos. Once, millions of generations ago, we possessed physical body-forms infinitely more useful and adaptable than yours . . ."

TEMPLE gasped as his thought-visions brought him pictures of monstrous Vards tilling alien soils, fabricating strange instruments and tools with their marvelously prehensile tentacle-tips, building and dwelling together in vast cities. Were the entities and the Vards divergent offspring of a common root?

"Inevitably there were some of us more interested in the development of the mind than of the body, more hungry for knowledge than for material possessions. It is always thus with every race, on every world. Even on your earth, in your own country, you see each passing year widening the gap between the farmer and the pure scholar.

"With us, as the ages passed, our separate interests gradually evolved two separate races. The Vards remained essentially in their original form, content to blend craftsmanship and labor with thought.

"We, who neglected our bodies to build our minds, found those unused body-forms wasting away, being discarded by the forward surge of inexorable evolution, until at last we reached a stage where our minds existed without any physical body whatever."

Awed, Temple watched the mighty pageant of evolution unfold on his mind-screen. He saw certain of the Vards withdraw to barren cells to concentrate on thought while their unused tentacles and finally their bulging bodies withered and died.

"Take heed, earth people," Monj thundered. "A million years hence, your evolution will have swept you on to the same ultimate state—and to the same inescapable doom. You know I am right.

"Already, in the past hundred years that are no more than a second in eternal time, you have seen your human bodies grow frailer while your minds sharpened and gained new strength. It will go on until you are like us."

The visions became nightmares, showing Temple the final dissolution of the Vard bodies, the growing hordes of bodiless, dissociated entities that replaced them. And always the scenes flashed back to those other Vards who toiled on without the all-consuming ambition, who prospered and were happy, content to let mind and body develop together.

With growing horror, Temple saw the logic of Monj's prophecy. Was this to be the future of the human race, to become darting clouds of pure energy doomed to an intangible eternity?

"But we were proud of our accomplishment," Monj continued. "We drove on and on until we could find no more problems to be solved, no more secrets to unlock in all the cosmos.

"It became convenient for us to employ physical bodies to perform the tasks our super-minds conceived we made the common Vards our vehicles. Thus we had all the advantages of corporel bodies with none of the discomforts or obligations. It was a most happy combination."

"I'll bet the Vards were overjoyed," Temple growled.

"They were favored," Monj said stiffly. "They gained all our vast knowledge without sacrificing their own bodies."

fection! We had overlooked one thing. Evolution may be slowed or speeded or diverted into strange bypaths, as your earth scientists have done with radiation bombardments to the generations of *Drosophila*—but it cannot be halted! Evolution must go inexorably on.

"We have evolved into an ultimate energy form—only to discover that it was not the ultimate, after all. Ahead lay another step—the mergence of our separate energies into the one great all-pervading universal energy.

Murder Mystery Stalks Mars

IN

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IT'S A REAL BAFFLER!

COMING NEXT ISSUE

Temple's lips thinned as he saw a vision of the humble Vards, torn from home and homely occupations to toil in shops and laboratories, each driven to do his task by the glowing entity on its brain.

He saw them building space ships of fantastic form that flashed among the stars and planets until, in all the galaxy, there were no riddles left unsolved. The immensity of their accomplishments left him weak, breathless and trembling.

"Too late, we learned of our doom." Monj's voice sank. "The doom of per-

"To us, that meant oblivion, the destruction of all our separate personalities. And what lay beyond that, we could not even guess. We only knew that in a few hundred generations, our race would cease to exist."

The visions changed, filling Temple with a great sadness and a great pity. He saw Rocossen's lips droop, saw tears well in Lee's eyes as they shared the despair of a dying race.

"We saw our doom, but we refused to accept it. Somewhere in the universe there must be salvation for our race, we felt sure. I was commissioned

to find that unknown factor."

On the screen of his mind, Temple saw the great space ship, driven by entity-controlled Vards, flash out through the universe. From planet to planet it went, searching, ever searching, reaching familiar systems, flashing past the sun to curve toward earth. He felt the terrible impact of the wandering meteor that smashed the controls, sent it crashing, instead, on the dead moon, in the heart of Plato Crater.

"For centuries we lived in the ruined ship," Monj went on, "while the Vards who survived the crash worked desperately to affect our rescue. Ships were constructed of the crude natural minerals of your moon and hurled toward Earth bearing Xacrns in search of aid but the centuries passed, and no aid came.

"Finally we concluded that some inimical radiation outside must be destroying them and proved its presence. Until then we, shielded by the natural material of our own ship, were unaware of its existence.

"Meanwhile, a new distaster faced us. Our Vards, being mortal, were growing old, dying, with none to take their places. We faced the eventuality of being stranded, helpless.

"With their last strength, the surviving Vards built eleven ships, insulated them with shells of our native metal and sent them out. This time the expedition reached its goal, constructed the crude repulsion ships and established contact. The rest you know."

THE visions suddenly vanished from Temple's mind, leaving him awed, gasping.

"But what are you seeking?" he cried. "What discovery can save your dying race? Why aim all your stones at Kansas?"

"You have seen enough," Monj said coldly. "The rest will be answered when you have joined our project."

"We're not joining," Temple roared, snapped back to reality by the words. "We're not substituting for your Vards."

Monj's face darkened. He gestured coldly, and the living barrier of Vards broke. Before Temple could move, coils of rubbery tentacles whipped around him, pinioning his arms. He saw that Lee and Rocossen were similarly held.

"Take those two into the depths," Monj indicated Lee and the astronomer. "Remove the silver caps and wait until the vapors have evaporated from their brains. Then seize them.

He turned toward Temple and his eyes narrowed.

"This one is to be prepared at once for the operation."

"Operation?" A cold chill touched Temple's nerves.

The figure that was Monj spread slender hands.

"This body and brain was the property of a skilled surgeon. That skill will serve us well in a few moments when a simple operation removes that silver plate from your head so that I myself may enter and take full possession of your splendid brain. Take them away."

CHAPTER XVI

Desolate Sanctuary

TEMPLE was stunned, frozen at the thought of losing the silver screen that had been his defense. It would be so simple to remove, and, once it was gone, his brain would be completely unguarded. The thought of becoming a slave to the entities, of taking part in their still mysterious project against the human race, filled him with agony. The thought of Lee and Rocossen returned to that slavery was a knife-thrust in his heart.

"Summon me when Temple is ready for the operation," Monj instructed the Vards.

The largest of the grotesque Vards bobbed its hulking body in an obeisance. A triangular mouth opened below the saucer eyes and unbelievable, impossible sounds came forth.

"It shall be done," the Vard said, in perfect English.

Temple gaped in stunned amazement. He saw Lee blink dazedly. The idea of human speech issuing from those alien mouths was indescribably shocking.

The pressure of the clutching tentacles, moving them irresistably toward the mouth of the sloping passageway, broke the paralysis that clutched Temple's mind. Desperation spurred him, whipping his mind to furious activity. His eyes fell on the outline of the distant closed door with the space suits hanging beside it.

Some instinctive blaze of revolt made him brace his feet against the forward pressure and fight to break the clutching grip of the tentacles. His muscles swelled, c o r d e d, and perspiration streamed down his face. It was blind, hopeless resistance, yet—

Abruptly, a gripping tentacle slipped under the bulging pressure, and a sucker disc broke loose with a sharp *pop*. It was mad, impossible, but he was matching his strength against that of the great decapods—and winning!

"Fight!" he panted at Lee and Rocossen. "Monj told us the Vards were old, almost too far gone to finish the last space ships. Fight them! Break their holds!"

He pressed out against their clutches until his eyes misted and blood roared in his ears. Dimly he knew that somewhere near the voice of Monj was roaring insanely and that the massed figures of human slaves were rushing to aid the Vards. With superhuman, desperate strength he tore away the last clinging coil and sent the aged creatures reeling back.

Rocossen and Lee, following his example, w e r e fighting desperately against their own captors. Temple rushed in clawing and tearing at the encircling arms. Suddenly they were free, facing the massed fury of the onrushing human slaves.

"Over here," Temple bellowed and raced for the door, dragging Lee and Rocossen with him. "Our only hope is to get outside where they can't follow us. I'll fight back the mob while you two get into suits. Then you hold them while I dress . . ."

"No," Rocossen panted. "Grab suits —and run—out! There's some thin air outside—not too cold."

HOPE blazed in Temple's heart. He knew that Pickering and many other astronomers believed there was still some atmosphere on the moon, pools of it trapped in the depths of giant craters like Plato.

If there was enough to temper the intense cold, they could get beyond reach of the entities and pause long enough to don space suits. Without shielded armor, the entities would instantly perish under the direct cosmic radiations. . . .

An idea flamed in Temple's brain. In mid-stride he swerved and caught the limp tentacles of the Vard leader who had slumped to the floor, exhausted. Without pausing he raced on, dragging the helpless creature after him, inches beyond the clutching hands of their pursuers.

Ahead, Rocossen was tearing at the door catch as Lee jerked down the bulky suits. Still dragging his feebly-resisting captive, Temple snatched a suit with one hand and pounded through after them, into a narrow airlock.

Rocossen slammed the inner door in the face of their pursuers, holding it against their weight while Lee tugged open the outer lock. A blast of intense cold struck them like a tangible wall, driving knives of agony through their chests.

Not daring to speak, holding their breaths against the rarified air, they raced across brittle lava to a jumbled heap of gray rock. High overhead, sunlight threw a knife-edged lance of unbearable illumination against the crater wall, but down here in the shadows it was almost totally dark. Only the tenuous wisps of dying atmosphere held a faint, gray radiance that made the darkness a lighter dusk.

Still holding their breaths, they clambered into the bulky unfamiliar suits, clamping bulbous helmets into place, opening valves that flooded the suits with invigorating air. At their feet, the captive Vard stirred feebly.

Lee pressed her helmet against Temple's.

"Curt, that poor creature will die without protection. That's cruel—"

"I don't think so," Temple answered as Rocossen bent forward to share the conversation. "There weren't any suits for them, yet they must have worked outside a great deal.

"I wanted to get him out here where the radiations would destroy his entity. If he suffers, of course we'll send him back."

The Vard rose shakily and laid a tentacle tip against Temple's helmet.

"Thank you for my freedom," it said. "It is the first I have ever experienced. It is a strange, lonely feeling—but I like it. Do not worry about me.

"My immense lungs find plenty of oxygen in this thin air and I do not even feel what you call cold. It is only outside the depths of this crater, where there is no air at all, that I would perish."

A gusty sigh drifted faintly to Temple's ears from the direction of Rocossen's helmet.

"Amazing, Temple. Incredible. I commend you on your ingenuity. You have rescued us from the enemy, and we are safe."

"Safe," Temple said grimly, "except for the minor matter of food and water and oxygen renewal that will probably become a little bit annoying in time."

"What do we do now, Curt," Lee asked.

"To be absolutely truthful, darned if I know. The idea of losing my screen and seeing us all made into entity slaves just didn't appeal so I organized a revolt. Beyond that, I haven't had time to think.

"But we'd better be good and quick. These suits don't seem any too well insulated and I can't find any trace of a heating unit. That cold is penetrating."

"Y-y-your t-telling m-me," Lee interrupted. "My t-teeth are ch-chattering already."

"In spite of the air," Rocossen remarked, "it must be well over a hundred degrees below zero down here. We shall freeze."

"Cheer up," Temple grinned wryly, pointing upward. "That sunline is practically racing down the crater wall toward us. When it reaches here, the temperature will go up to better than two hundred above. If there was only some way—" he whirled toward the Vard.

"You, whatever your name is. Do you know of any way we might stay alive out here?"

"My name is Decex Vard," the creature answered solemnly, "which means I am the member of the Vard race whose identification number is ten thousand. We are all designated by number.

"I know of no haven for you unless we might find a cave whose rocks both store and keep out the coming heat. There are a few such in the crater wall. I shall seek one."

HE shuffled off, probing the eerie writhing tentacles into masses of debris. Temple was staring around him fascinated and awed by the weird nightmare landscape of the great crater, when Lee's helmet clicked against his.

"Whatever we do we'd better do fast, Curt. About a dozen men in space suits just came tumbling out of the lock. They're carrying funny-looking guns and I think in about a minute we'll be able to keep warm just by running."

Temple whirled and groaned. Faint light from the open port gleamed on silvery space suits massed in front of the dome. They must be special suits, insulated against cosmic rays to protect the entities from destruction. Ordinarily, he guessed, they did not go out, but merely implanted lasting thought patterns on the minds of those slaves who were sent beyond the lock.

Decex Vard came lumbering back, frantically waving a tangle of arms toward the dome.

"They come," he shrilled. "Slaves of your race guided by the strongest mind-forces and armed with the terrible weapon of atomic blast. You must flee. There is no deep cave near."

"Where can we go?" Rocossen cried. "In a few minutes this whole crater will be in direct sunlight. There's enough air down here to diffuse the light, too, so the shadows of rocks won't be deep enough to hide us completely."

"Up the crater wall is our only chance", Temple barked. "We can keep hidden as long as we stay beyond the line of sunilght. Come on."

They raced across the crater floor in grotesque leaps, utilizing the lighter lunar gravitation to increase the speed of their flight. The weaker muscles of the aged Vard proved unequal to their terrestrial strength, and they slowed somewhat to drag him between them.

"I don't see any pursuit yet," Temple panted finally. "So they evidently didn't see us. Let's dig into that mountain of broken rock over there against the crater wall and rest a bit."

They flung themselves down in the blackness, panting and trembling from exertion. Temple's eyes were sultry.

"We shouldn't get out of breath so fast," he gasped. "I'm afraid this means our oxygen supply is low. Those tanks seemed terribly small."

Decex Vard waved his tentacles around them for contact.

"The suits are equipped for only an hour at lowest metabolism," he stated. "That is so there could be no danger of a slave breaking the mind-shackles and attempting flight."

"What," Temple gasped. "Can such a thing happen? Do any of them ever throw off the entity's control?"

"Occasionally. Only humans do it, and apparently only those who saw and fought against seizure. If the entity catches a mind completely unawares and unsuspecting, its domination is complete."

"Whew!" Lee whistled. "Will I ever give them a battle next time?"

"Decex Vard," Temple asked. "What are the entities looking for? Why are they so anxious to seize control of Earth? I don't see how conquering the human race will save them from ultimate evolution that they fear so greatly."

"Oh, but my masters are not trying to conquer Earth," the Vard answered quickly. "Except for the failure of our poor bodies, they would never have touched Earth at all.

"But in order to return to Xacrn it was necessary to secure metals and other vital products not found on the moon, as well as skilled hands to fabricate those products into the necessary vessel. To do all that swiftly and accurately required the work of hundreds.

"So those Xacrns who set out for Earth were instructed to concentrate on opening regular communication between Earth and Moon. With that done, and all Xacrns equipped with skilled bodies, they could move Earth, build the great ship and go home."

"You mean," Lee gasped, "that all this—this reign of terror was for no other purpose than to give you manpower and metal so you could go home?"

"Of course. While my masters had not solved the secret of perpetuation of the race, time was growing short and they desired to end their days on their native planet."

"For Pete's sake!" Temple barked. "The dopes! Why didn't they come down and ask for what they wanted?"

The great saucer eyes stared blankly.

"You mean—you mean that in your civilization individuals *ask* for what they desire instead of merely taking it?" His tentacles waved dazedly. "Truly your race is a strange one."

"CURTIS," Rocossen gasped, "can you imagine that? But it stands to reason that a race concentrating on super-evolution would understand no law but the evolutionary code of might—survival of the fittest and destruction to the weak."

Temple was shaking his head in dazed incredulity.

"What a colossal misunderstanding," he whispered. "A mighty cosmic joke on everybody. If we'd known that, maybe we could have reached an understanding instead of fighting.

"Maybe we can still bring our alien ideas into harmony. I feel sorry for the poor fools, now that I know their history and aims. And, bad as they've acted, do you realize that they themselves haven't taken a single human life that we know of?"

"I was under the impression," Rocossen said drily, "that they tried hard enough in our case. I dislike giving them all the credit for our prowess."

"But by their standards," Temple insisted, frowning, "any resistance to us was in the nature of self defense. No, Rocky, I've quit hating the entities, suddenly, and started wishing I could help them. I believe all this can be mediated."

Lee came tumbling down from a quick peep over the parapet of rock that hid them. Behind the faceplate of the helmet, her hair was a golden cloud over her eyes.

"You can start mediating anytime, Curt," she panted. "Six of those pa-

thetic creatures are headed this way, following our tracks in the lava dust, and from the way they're holding their guns, they mean business."

"Temple sprang up, his face paling.

"Start climbing higher," he barked. "We have the advantage of rocks that won't show tracks from here up. Come on, Decax. We'll haul you up as high as your lungs can stand the rarity. And don't worry. We won't let you be taken back to slavery as long as one of us is left to fight."

Decex Vard's tentacles quivered frantically, whipped out and drew the helmets against his leathery bulk.

"But I *want* to go back," he protested. "Already I feel lost without the great Vrif who has been a part of my life for these many centuries.

"I only wanted to see what freedom was like, as a brief adventure. You are kind—but none of us want to lose our masters. We suffer and tire, but we would not change."

Lee Mason collapsed on a rock, gasping.

"Well, I'll—be—darned!" she whispered in most unlady-like amazement.

CHAPTER XVII

Flight and Capture

TEMPLE'S jaw dropped, and his eyes bulged. *"What?"* he roared at the quivering Vard. "We risk our idiotic necks to rescue you, and you don't *want* to be rescued?"

He got a swift impression that if the writhing creature had possessed a head, it would now be hanging that head in embarrassment. Somehow, deprived of its entity-master, the Vard was singularly childish for all its amazing knowledge and abilities.

"Forgive me, most kind of friends. Our worlds are so far apart that even our affections are alien. But what I said is true. Those others are our people, our guides and leaders, and we would be savages without them.

"They make us work until we fall from exhaustion and they drive us into pain and suffering, not because they hate us but because their energy-minds feel no such thing as emotion. Love, hate, fear, pain—the entities, as you call them, recognize those states only as words.

"We understand that and are not resentful. We do our best, accept the kindness of our masters and find life good. You have meant great kindness to me and mine and that intent is appreciated. But I must return. Thank —you and farewell."

Before they could move, he was up, loping down the slope like a great, many-legged dog, to face the oncoming men.

"Poor, simple-minded dupe," Lee whispered. "He would actually be lonesome without pain and oppression and—"

"That poor, simple-minded dupe," Temple interrupted harshly, "has just showed those hunters down there exactly where we're hiding by barging out that way. Get down. They're raising those odd guns to their shoulders.

An instant later there was a blinding, soundless flash above their heads and a huge pinnacle of rock burst into drifting dust. Another eery burst of light shattered a boulder to their right and fragments rattled sharply against their suits.

"Whew! What energy!" Temple gasped. "We've got to get out of here in a hurry before those blasts eat away every rock in this heap—and us with them."

They scrambled back an instant before the very rock on which they had been standing was shattered by the weird, soundless flash of energy.

"We don't dare try to climb," Tempel said as they fled from the bombardment. "They're near enough now to see us against the cliff as our suits reflect star-shine. Stick behind these boulders and maybe we can break back into the plain far enough away to get clear."

They raced over scattered debris from the towering wall overhead, painfully conscious of the dwindilng oxygen supply that would soon make all their efforts futile. Rocossen staggered close to touch Temple's helmet as they ran.

"What—did you—say," he gasped, "about — sparing — human lives — in their—activities?"

Temple swore at him and pounded on, head down, flaming agony biting into his lungs with every breath.

They reached the end of their rocky screen and halted.

"Which way now, Curt? We can't last much longer—and there comes the sunlight line to burn us up in another five or ten minutes."

"To the dome. Our only hope is the rocket hangar behind. There may be a store of oxygen there or some way of getting into one of the rockets."

They bounded out onto the inky floor of the crater and plowed to a halt. Ahead, something was moving through the darkness, an occasional faint glint of reflected starlight revealing its presence.

"One of the hunters," Temple whispered, squinting. "But I can only see one person, and he seems to have his back to us. Come on, let's slip closer and try to get that gun away and pin him down. He may be carrying extra oxygen tanks."

THEY stole forward, scarcely breathing, and neared the dim figure.

It was one man, carrying one of the rifles that fired the devastating atomic blasts, and he was studying the plains for signs of his quarry.

The three pounced together, metal clanged against metal, and the enemy was down, writhing helplessly inside his clumsy armor. Temple hurled the atomic rifle out of sight among the overhanging rocks.

He could never use a deadly weapon as long as he knew that his adversaries were helpless, entity-driven dupes who might yet be restored to normal.

There were two spare oxygen tanks strapped to his belt.

"You and Rocky take these," Temple ordered brusquely. "I'll combine the oxygen that's left in your two tanks and have nearly as much. We may be able to grab another hunter soon."

Despite their protestations, he exchanged the fresh oxygen tanks for the depleted ones, which he slung on his own belt, and motioned them on. They left the entity slave struggling to his feet.

"He can't do much without a weapon," Temple told the others, "and the chances are he'll head back for more oxygen. His first tank must be low, too. Now we're good for another hour, and a lot can happen in an hour. We might even figure out a way to save the Xacrn race and exchange that knowledge for our freedom."

"You can't stop evolution," Rocossen shouted.

"I'm not too sure," Temple denied, shaking his head. "Besides, it's the only possible way I can see to stop all the horrors like the Crimson Plague that will go on as long as the entities need bodies."

He plodded on, absorbed in thought.

Without any warning, the lava dust in front of his feet exploded in a burst of livid flame, and a mighty, invisible force hurled him off his feet. He landed on his back, bruised and breathless from contact with the hard shell of the suit, and saw Rocossen and Lee stumbling toward him with other bursts of atomic fury pursuing them.

Temple got to his feet groggily and lurched into a run, waving them to follow an erratic course that would make aiming difficult. The gunner was hidden somewhere in the darkness, and with no tell-tale muzzle flash to betray his presence, there was no way of knowing for sure which way led to safety.

The three raced on, weaving and dodging, and for a moment there were no more explosions. Temple began to breathe again as the menace seemed to have passed.

Then abruptly a new burst came almost underfoot and another in midair between their tumbling bodies. Temple realized, then, that they must have been running straight at the unseen marksman.

Scrambling up, they pounded away to the side, changed directions and hammered on while the deadly bursts fell away behind them and finally quit completely. They slowed to a staggering walk and drew together.

"That was close," Lee gasped.

"Too close," Rocossen agreed. "Altogether—too—close."

His bulky figure suddenly reeled and went down heavily, to lie motionless in the lava dust. With a pang in his heart, Temple dropped down beside the

astronomer and saw the slender lips moving behind the faceplate. He touched his helmet to the other's.

"Carry on, you two," Rocossen whispered, coughing. "Don't fuss over me until you get caught."

"Rocky! What is it?" Temple bent closer and saw the long ragged gash through the metal breast plate of Rocossen's suit. "Are you badly hurt?"

"Not hurt—at all," Rocossen grinned. "Just—out of breath. I cut off—my oxygen. You take it. There's no—way to patch—a suit out here. Good luck."

"Lee!" Temple whirled toward her. "Get going. Head back for the crater wall, stay out of the sunlight when it gets there and watch for help. Don't try to get into the hangar now."

"Curt, what do you mean? What are you—"

"I'm taking Rocky in to the dome," Temple snapped. "He can't lie there and strangle and there's no way to patch the suit. With his oxygen turned on full, he can get enough to breathe until we make the dome. It's the only way. I'm still safe from seizure by the entities so there's a fighting chance. Hurry!"

WITHOUT another word he gathered the protesting figure in his arms and lurched to his feet.

"Go back to that rock heap where they nearly caught us before and stay close. It's the safest spot, now that they've driven us away from it once. Stay there and don't move except to avoid being seen or caught by patroling hunters."

"But Curt, what can I—"

"I'll show the entities that we aren't antagonistic to their purpose and be back as fast as I can with a rescue party. My silver screen will keep me free and safe until I've explained ways in which we can help them and after that everything will be all right.

"Just wait for me. You've got oxygen enough, now, for an hour to an hour and a half, and the cold can't get you as long as you move around. Good luck, darling."

He touched her helmet briefly with his own, smiled into her anxious eyes and was gone, staggering off into the darkness with his burden.

Despite the fact that lunar gravitation gave his burden a total weight of less than fifty pounds, Temple's arms soon ached torturously. Still he pounded on, lungs straining for every gulp of air, sweat pouring down his face, legs pistoning numbly on by the sheer driving effort of desperation.

He had to get Rocossen into the dome before the last trickle of compressed oxygen had fled through that gaping rent in his suit. Temple could feel the hiss of escaping air against the chest wall of his own suit and the dwindling sound of it filled him with despair.

He plodded doggedly on, losing all sense of space and time, guided by the stark blaze of advancing sunlight along the crater wall to his right. In his arms, the slender figure of Rocossen had given up its futile, feeble efforts to protect and lay quietly, conserving air.

Where, a few short minutes before, it had seemed that everywhere they turned they ran into searching entity slaves, intent on their capture, Temple now began to feel that he had plodded on for hours in an absolutely uninhabited land. He would have welcomed capture to be relieved of his burden, to see stronger hands bear Rocossen to safety. He trudged on.

His reeling brain turned inevitably to the entities and their fantastic doom. A race of super-intelligences, hurtling inexorably along the path of evolution to oblivion. A civilization wiped out, not by its shortcomings and evils but by its very perfection.

Why did his mind persist in gnawing at their problem? How could he hope to find a key to their salvation where their super-minds had sought it for centuries without success? Compared to their knowledge and their science, the greatest accomplishments of earth were no more than the cloudy myths of a savage tribe.

TEMPLE tried to dismiss the thoughts but they beat back into his mind with relentless purpose. Think, Temple! Study the problem from new angles! There is a salvation for the Xacrns, and the key to it lies within your grasp. You had the answer in your hands once within the past hour

and let it slip away unrecognized. Bring it back! Think, man. *Think!*

Temple groaned aloud. If he could show the entities how to save themselves from extinction, how to return to Xacrn with immortality for their race, his own personal problems and those of earth would be automatically solved.

How long would it take the entities to build their escape ship and leave earth forever? A month? A year?

This would be no blast-driven rocket capable of lumbering the few scant miles from earth to moon and back, but some new marvel beyond human comprehensible. It would be an impossible, unthinkable mechanism capable of flashing across inter-galactic space where the very milestones were hundreds, thousands, millions of light-years apart.

Such a craft might take years to build, ample time for resentful humans and arrogant entities to lock in horrible and profitless warfare. Temple shuddered at the vision. Such an eventuality could only be halted if he found the elusive answer that hammered at his brain.

Without any warning at all, Temple found himself plodding automatically into the midst of space-suited figures who closed in, covering him and his burden with the deadly atomic rifles. He stared at them dully for a moment, and then realization of what those figures meant brought a gasp of thankfulness to his lips.

Dropping to his knees, Temple gestured frantically at the gaping rent in Rocossen's suit and ahead toward the still-invisible dome where the life-giving air waited. His urgent message got across to them. Two figures bent down, staring, then seized Rocossen's figure between them and raced off into the darkness.

The rest closed in, prodded Temple to his reeling, rubbery legs and drove him ahead. He went willingly, his mind absorbed in his coming meeting with Monj.

This time things would be different. When the entities saw that there was hope of realizing their impossible goal, there would be cooperation and united effort. For all their alien form, they were thinking, reasoning beings, fighting only for the perpetuation of their race.

Success was very near. Temple had a clear, positive impression that he was on the verge of discovering or isolating the key. As soon as a rescue crew had brought Lee in from the airless wastes, he would have Monj repeat the entire story of Xacrn history, exactly as it had been told before. Somewhere, during the past hours, Temple had seen or heard something that was a vital clue. It must of necessity be hidden in the Xacrn's own past history.

The great dome loomed out of the darkness. Temple let himself be rushed through the airlock and into the great interior. The first sight he saw was Rocossen sitting up unaided beside the wrecked space suit, looking pale and shaken but unharmed.

Then Temple saw the waiting assembly, Monj and his lieutenants at the front, Vards ranged watchfully at each side, the rows of human slaves behind. As Temple's captors shoved him into the room, Monj and his companions hastened closer. Temple grinned at

[*Turn page*]

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him through the faceplate as he waited for the helmet to be unscrewed and removed.

One of Temple's captors stood back of him while two others turned and raised the bulbous helmet. Fresh, sweet air struck his face and he breathed deeply.

He was still drawing in that first long breath when the entity slave behind him took a step forward and slammed a padded club against the side of his head with stunning force. Dimly, from a queer high vantage point, he seemed to see himself plunging forward to his face, seemed to hear Monj say coldly:

"Excellent, Div. We can take no chances on his getting away from us again. Carry him into the chamber at once. I'll operate and remove the silver screen immediately, while he is unconscious from the blow."

Temple tried to cry out, to tell Monj that he had the key to their salvation. He tried to tell him that Lee was out there in the crater, waiting, her air supply dwindling by the minute until soon there would not even be enough left to carry her to the dome to surrender.

He was still trying to choke the words out of his frozen throat when his senses fled and darkness closed in.

CHAPTER XVIII

Impossible Rescue

WITH her heart pounding uncontrollably and cold fingers brushing her nerves, Lee Mason hurried away from her farewell to Temple, back toward the sheltering debris below the crater wall. Alone for the first time, she began to realize just how far away she was from the familiar landscape of Earth, how helpless against the unknown menace of this alien nightmare land.

On Earth she had thought nothing of braving a hundred deaths in scientific exploration among jagged mountain peaks, deep in subterranean caverns, up among the clouds in planes and balloons. Ordinarily she was cold, calm, nerveless.

But tonight a nameless terror filled the weird darkness and drenched her with cold perspiration. It was not a fear of the hunters nor of any unknown life form that might conceivably inhabit the eternal shadows. It was simply the reaction of over-taxed nerves to the added menace of the unknown dark.

In the grip of that unreasoning panic, Lee's feet forced her from a walk to a trot that swiftly grew into a run and then wild flight. She bounded frantically toward the looming barrier of the thousand-foot crater wall, seeking some cranny where she could squeeze in and let the luxury of solid substance against her back and sides calm the trembling of her nerves. Behind her the sharp, incredible terminator boundary between light and darkness raced across the giant bowl in pursuit.

Suddenly a low rim of rock loomed in her path. Without slowing, Lee flexed her firm earth muscles and leaped over the barrier. It was a tremendous leap that swept her beyond the hurdle a good sixty feet. She came down, muscles set for the impact of landing, and there was none.

She came down into the shadow of the ground and the shadow had no substance. Before she could gasp, she was falling endlessly down into the dead crust of the moon, down a slanting shaft of absolute darkness, lined with jagged rocks that plucked metallically at her bulging armor without slowing her breathless fall.

It seemed that she had fallen for hours into the bowels of the moon and would go on falling for more hours. Then suddenly she slammed down among the upflung teeth of massive rocks at the bottom of the shaft and her head struck the faceplate of her helmet with a crushing force that brought the blackness through into her brain.

She came back to consciousness with a sharp wonder that she had survived the fall and was still alive. Her body was one mass of bruised agony from banging against the poorly-padded interior of the suit but as nearly as she could tell the bruises were only superficial.

The faceplate of her helmet was miraculously intact, and the suit retained its air supply. Plainly she owed her

life to the lesser lunar gravity that had given her plunging body only one-sixth its normal earth weight.

Intense, absolute darkness, unrelieved by any shade or glow, surrounded her and completely concealed her environment. There was no way of discovering the nature of the shaft or her chances of climbing back to the surface, for she carried no flashlight. There were matches in her purse but that was inside the suit, strapped to her belt.

The fall had jarred the panic from her nerves and she managed a shaky laugh as she sat up and started to climb to her feet. Abruptly the laugh died on her lips. From the waist down her suit was rigidly immovable. She lay back and tugged and kicked until her lungs ached and perspiration rolled into her eyes, but the metal cylinders that encased her legs were rock-solid.

Genuinely alarmed, Lee sat up again and fumbled with her steel-gauntleted hands for the cause of the phenomenon. Her hands encountered a massive block of rough stone, apparently dislodged by her stumbling body, that lay across her knees.

Try as she would, she could not budge it, nor could she stretch far enough to reach its boundaries. For all she could tell, it might be the whole crater wall pinning her down.

She shuddered at the realization that only the metal legs of the suit had kept her from being crushed to pulp under that massive rock.

Lee lay back, fighting down a fresh panic, trying to reason sanely. She could not summon enough strength or gain sufficient leverage to free her suit. That much was certain. Nor could she hope that Temple, searching for her, would ever stumble onto this particular shaft and discover her whereabouts at the bottom.

She had no light to flash upward, no gun to shoot to attract attention, and in that rarified air she could not shout until her lungs burst without ever a whisper drifting to the surface, an incalculable distance above. Realizing these things, she became suddenly aware of a dull ache in her chest and an abnormal hammering in her ears. That could mean only one thing. Her air was running low, thinning out to extinction.

Lee lay back against the cold rock and blew away a drop of perspiration that tickled the end of her nose.

"Well, Lee Mason," she whispered. "It looks like the beginning of a very nasty end." She shivered. "But what a cold, lonely place to die in."

LATE in the afternoon, a group of shaken men gathered in the gloom of the smaller rocket hangar in the Arizona camp and stared wearily at one another. Farge, looking like the survivor of some gigantic explosion with his black eyes, battered face and tattered clothing, hugged the flat case of a projector and stared gloomily up through the open roof.

Mullane and Lansdon and Jacobs and the other scientists, bearing lesser bruises but dazed and shaken from their recent experience, faced him anxiously.

The camp guards, restored to normal but still sullen and frightened, huddled close by.

"Blast!" Farge cried suddenly in hoarse fury. "Curt and Lee are up there, facing God knows what horrors, and all we can do is stand around like a bunch of bumps on a log. We can't lift a finger to help them, don't even know that they're still alive. For all we know, they may have been overcome and forced to join that fiendish crowd by this time."

"Take it easy," Mullane soothed. "We know how you feel, Allen. After all, none of us can forget that we were forced to take a hand in getting them up there." He drew a shaking hand across his ashen face.

"Lord! I thought we were doomed to that slavery for all eternity. Nothing in the world ever felt so good as the agony of that beam you managed to turn on us, finally."

Farge straightened and managed a wan smile.

"Forget it. I'm sorry I get the jitters but it's this feeling of utter helplessness now, after having had such a big hand in fighting the menace before."

He had told them of the weary weeks of research and experiment that led to perfection of the weapon and this in-

vasion of the camp. For a time after the grim battle, when the rocket had blasted off with Lee and Temple and Rocossen and when Farge had finally battled his way clear long enough to adjust his projector and destroy the remaining entities, they had been too weary and shaken to do more than talk.

Later, carrying Lansdon's bulky detector instrument, they had combed the whole camp area, destroying every floating entity that blazed on the screen.

"You think we'd better stay in camp and keep quiet a while longer?" Jacobs, the lanky chemist asked.

Farge waved an expressive hand.

"What else can we do? This place is our only thread of contact with the moon, now. If a rocket returns, it's got to come here, and we've got to be here to meet it.

"Besides, if I stick my nose outside, about five hundred FBI men are going to land on it with hobnailed shoes. If they guessed I was in here, we'd have an invasion on our hands right now."

"Personally," Lansdon growled, "I'd give anything to put a thousand miles between me and this place, but I see your point. And if we went out now and tried to tell the truth, we'd probably land in a first class booby batch. The very least we'd get would be locked up for a few weeks while a bunch of fat-headed politicians investigated our stories."

"How can we ever face people, anyhow," Meeker demanded, "after the ghastly things those entities made us do? Hey, listen to that! Thunder. Must be going to storm."

Farge cocked his head, listening. Suddenly his eyes widened. He leaped toward the door.

"Thunder, heck!" he bawled over his shoulder. "That's a rocket coming back. Maybe it's Curt with news of victory."

"And maybe it's those fiends back for more bodies," Mullane snarled. "But how can they travel at any old time of the day or night like this? I always thought a rocket had to be timed exactly to the split second in order to intersect the orbit of the body it's aimed at."

"Not this one," Davoe panted, running beside him. "I made the trip with Eno once and saw how it worked. They've got direct-vision screens of some kind that show the moon. All they have to do is blast off at any time, turn until the moon shows on the screen and then head for it by dead reckoning, aiming the ship like a gun.

"Of course they have to keep swinging to compensate for the moon's motion, like guiding a telescope with a manually-operated azimuth mounting."

OUT in the bright sunlight, they stopped, staring up at the vivid blue of the sky, trying to see the source of the steadily-deepening thunder. A tense expectancy gripped them all. What would the rocket bring?

"There it is!" Farge cried suddenly, pointing.

They all saw it, then, a pinpoint of black that swelled with incredible speed, painting a widening smoke path across the blue screen of the heavens as it screamed down the flat curve of its trajectory.

"Don't we have to do something to help it land?" Farge demanded suddenly.

"Lord, yes!" Lansdon snapped his fingers. "There's machinery that moves the cradle up to meet it and then lowers it to the pit on hydraulic cushions. I think I can remember how to operate it. My mind is hazy on most of what I did during that time, but that seems clear enough. Come on."

Moments later they stood in the hanger, screened from the searing blasts of the jets, as the smaller rocket dropped expertly into its waiting cradle and was lowered to floor level.

"Oh-oh," Mullane muttered. "I don't like that. It's handled too expertly for an amateur. That must mean—"

He left the rest unsaid, a grim threat hanging over them. They hid behind pillars near the foot of the gangplank, listening tensely to the sob of pumps unlocking the sealed port. Jacobs held the detector in readiness. Farge's hands were clammy as they gripped the projector, ready to blast if enemies appeared.

The great lockplate dropped at last, and the slender figure of Eno Rocossen appeared at the head of the gangplank,

staring warily around. Even before they saw the violet blaze on the detector screen, it was apparent that his brain was in the grip of an entity. The stiff coldness of his face and the flatness of his eyes gave ample visual evidence.

"Controlled!" Jacobs barked. "That means Curt and Lee are dead or their slaves. Blast him!"

Rocossen saw them at the same instant. His hand came around from behind him, levelling a blue beam projector.

Farge's lips thinned and a hot flame burst in his eyes. He pressed the trigger of his own weapon. Terrible, unseen radiations flashed out soundlessly and the entity on Rocossen's brain evaporated.

Mullane and Lansdon sprang forward to catch the astronomer as he toppled, but before they could reach him, he swayed back and plunged headlong off the narrow gangplank into the rocket pit below.

His plunging body struck the blackened concrete with a crunching thud and lay still.

"My God! Rocky!"

THEY clambered down the iron ladder and hauled him tenderly to the surface.

He was conscious, his face gray with pain. One arm dangled brokenly and a gash on his head oozed crimson.

"I'm okay," he whispered as they bent over him. "Got to get back to the moon. They've got Curt. Operating now—taking his silver screen. Hurry! Lee lost in—crater. Curt knows how—to stop entities. Rescue him!"

He closed his eyes.

"What are you going to do?" Davoe cried.

"I'm going after him!" Farge gritted, clenching his fists.

"Heavens, man!" Lansdon objected. "You don't know how to run the rocket and Eno may not recover in time. You'd never be able to. . . ."

"I'll never learn, sitting in an armchair," Farge snapped. "I can push and pull levers until we either take off or blow up. I'll figure the rest out after that. Anybody going along?"

CHAPTER XIX

Slave of Monj

AFTER the first dull resignation to an inexorable doom, Lee Mason's mind began to function again. It was better to die fighting than to lie back and wait for the end to come. She struggled upright again, vitalized by a return of her old fighting spirit.

It was only her suit that was trapped. If she could slip out of that, she would be free. But without the protection of the suit and its dwindling air supply, she would die quickly from the intense cold and rarified air.

Or would she? A new thought smashed into her mind. Thin air lingered in the great bowl of Plato, though it was not sufficient to support human life.

But if the air was at least tenuous at the crater's surface, it should be still more tangible in the bottom of this deep pit. While it might not be enough, it could be no less than her suit would contain in a few more minutes. And a quick finish was preferable to a slow, lingering one.

With steady fingers, Lee began to twist the bulbous helmet, withdrawing it from the air-seal at the throat. Suddenly it came loose and a rush of bitter cold stung her face. She drew a deep, racking breath that seemed to have no soothing effect on the shriek of her oxygen-starved cells.

She breathed more rapidly, gulping in sharp, bursting breaths of the thin atmosphere, and suddenly it seemed that the dizziness was lifting from her brain. It was true. The air was dangerously thin, but with care it might maintain her for a time.

Relieved, she unsnapped the seals and drew herself gingerly out of the trapped armor until she stood erect and unprotected in the pitchy darkness. The cold lashed at her with a thousand flaming knives, and the darkness beat down upon her in a stifling cloud, but she was free and still lived. And cold as it was, the layers of rock above her seemed to cut off the worst of it. They must gather and retain some heat from

the periods of terrible sunshine.

She was free—but for what purpose? Even if she could clamber up the shaft to the surface, the rarer air and greater cold would be fatal. Still she had to do something, keep moving, to keep her body from freezing and her brain from succumbing to the numbing horror of her predicament. With outstretched hands, she began to stumble forward, groping her way over the jagged rock floor.

She came to a hard, cold vertical wall, presently, and felt her way along its rough surface. Suddenly the wall vanished from before her hands and she stumbled forward onto a down-slanting floor that seemed to indicate a cavern or tunnel that branched off from the pit.

In here the cold was less intense, and her sobbing breaths were more satisfying, as though the air were heavier. Pressing the side wall for support and guidance, she stumbled ahead. The floor levelled off, after a time, and grew smoother so that she could make better progress.

She lost all track of time and distance until it seemed that her whole life had been spent in plunging endlessly into eternal night. Vaguely she knew that she was somewhere deep in the uninhabited, lifeless bowels of the dead moon, drawing ever further from the slender passage to the surface where there were human beings and light and air. But the full meaning of that had long since drifted from her reeling mind. She staggered on.

LEE saw the light ahead a long time before its meaning penetrated her brain. At first it was only the faintest imaginable lightening of the intense gloom. Then it became a glow and, at last, a circle of eerie radiance.

With a hoarse cry, Lee stumbled forward and out into a low corridor whose metallic walls were emitting a steady phosphorescent radiance that was somehow vaguely familiar.

But whatever it was, that lighted tunnel spelled the presence of life and the nearness of rescue and warmth and air. She ran down the tunnel at full speed, her clicking heels raising tiny clattering echoes that pursued her flitting figure, cackling eerily at her hope.

An eternity later, the corridor turned and opened out into a larger glowing chamber. From a long way off, Lee saw that chamber filled with familiar objects—chairs, a table, and, incongruously, a white porcelain hospital cot. A human figure moved slowly among these objects, a figure that was achingly familiar.

Lee raced into the chamber with a great sob of thankfulness on her lips.

"Curt! Oh, Curt! I don't know how you got here or how I got here, but here we are."

Temple turned and stared at her, his jaw dropping. There was something oddly different about his face, a coldness and stiffness. His eyes, too, were queer—flat and dull. She stopped suddenly and shrank back.

"Curt, what—what's wrong with you?"

He smiled stiffly and held out his hand.

"Nothing's wrong with me, Lee. Not a thing. I was only terribly surprised to see you here. Come here, Lee. Come to me."

Hesitantly she moved forward. Like a striking snake, his hand shot out and closed on her wrist and a grin of triumph curved his taut lips. It was only then that she noticed for the first time that the back of his scalp had been shaved clean of hair and that a small, stained pad of dressing was taped in the center of this space.

TEMPLE had wondered many times just what it felt like to be the slave of one of the glowing brain parasites. Now, as he opened his eyes and sat up stiffly on the hospital cot in the great glowing chamber, he knew and tasted the horror of that knowledge.

He, Curtis Temple, still existed as an ego, but he had the eerie sensation of smallness, of being compressed to a microscopic speck, his whole personality compacted into a single atom at the top of his aching head.

Below him stretched his own body. He could think about that body, see what it was doing, hate it and fear it and plan movements for it to make. But he could not control or affect it in any way.

He wanted to lie on the cot and ease his weariness and his mind, set the proper nerve-mechanisms into motion to produce that desired effect. But his tired body continued to rise, got up off the cot and moved about the room with steady steps. He realized, then, that he was but a helpless, voiceless spectator, relegated to the farthest recesses of his own mind by the omnipotent force of the usurping entity.

And he could no more interfere with or affect the activities of that conqueror force than he could jar the earth from its appointed orbit by kicking at a clod in the field.

"I am a slave," he thought wildly. "The entities took my silver screen and seized my brain."

He heard no sound but instantly an exultant answer graved itself across the plastic thought-screen of his mind.

"That is right. You are now my body, my vehicle, and a far more suitable one to my purposes than the slave I occupied before. Now Monj, the ancient one, is properly housed."

A swift, blazing terror flashed through the part of Temple's mind that was still his. He had held the lives and futures of hundreds of innocent persons in his hands and now that trust had been violated.

But there was something else, some great discovery he had been on the verge of making that would completely change everything. It was something about the entities, about a doom they faced.

Suddenly, frantically, he shut his mind to the thoughts. He had almost had it and he knew that if the solution reached the surface of his mind now, the terrible power of Monj would discover and seize it.

And if that happened Temple would have lost all hope of bargaining for freedom.

"What was that?" The question flashed sharply across his mind. "You had a thought, then—something about solving the problems of the Xacrn's future. Tell me what it was. Tell me, Temple, or I shall make your helpless body inflict tortures."

Desperately Temple fought to submerge the thought, to hide it from the deadly probing tentacles of the ruling force. For a moment his body reeled and staggered from the fury of the terrible psychic struggle in his brain.

Decex Vard had said that sometimes an entity's hold could be broken—but that was not reckoning with the greater strength of the leader, Monj. Slowly, inexorably, the secret was being probed out of Temple's brain, stolen despite his every effort.

THE struggle ended abruptly. There was an unbelievable interruption. Temple heard the glad accents of Lee Mason's voice and turned to face her. His mind uttered a wild cry of happiness and raced across to take her in his arms.

But his body, in the hands of Monj, stood motionless, stretching a traitorous hand, gloating as the victim stepped hesitantly forward to be seized. Temple's consciousness writhed and struggled and fought to break the deadly hold, to cry out a warning, but he was powerless.

He could only face the inevitable conquest, helpless, as the brain-force of Monj swept out through the air, summoning a free entity to hasten and seize her brain.

In a moment there would be no more free minds, no more resistance to the entities—only helpless slaves, forced to compete obedience of every command.

His hand lashed out and seized Lee's wrists, drawing her forward despite her sudden realization and desperate struggle to break free. His mind cried out in agony while his lips laughed in triumph.

Then something happened. It was as though the contact of his hand with Lee's sent a new stream of energy through his nerve-paths to his mind. Coupled with his own desperation, it exploded a new surge of strength.

He braced his mind against the solid rock of her nearness and fought the grasp of Monj, the conqueror. With every ounce of his will and determination he sought to drive the entity out.

Snarling, shrieking, threatening in soundless flashes of terrible thought, Monj resisted. Temple and Lee stood close together, their bodies frozen in rigidity as the terrible struggle went on

in Temple's brain. Lee, sensing what was happening, poured the strength of her own confidence into his and intensified his efforts.

Slowly they won. Slowly the entity retreated, losing grip after grip against the advancing force of Temple's will. There was pain, terrible blinding agony, and the sickening sensation of brain cells being torn from their resting places by clutching tentacles.

Suddenly it was over. With a last flame of resistance, Monj gave way and fled. Temple's body was weak, trembling, bathed in cold perspiration. But his mind was his own again, and wonderfully clear.

"You've won," Lee gasped, clinging to him. "You've driven the entity away."

"But only for the moment," Temple panted, holding her. "We've got to do something fast. Neither of us have any protection, now. I wouldn't have the strength to go through that struggle a second time and there'll be another entity along in a moment to seize your mind."

CHAPTER XX

A Deal Is Made

"QUICK!" Lee cried, tugging at his arm. "I know a way we can be safe for a little while, long enough to rest and make plans. Hurry!"

She dragged him back along the way she had just come, urging him to greater speed as they raced down the glowing passage.

"The radioactive lining ends back here a short distance," she panted explanation. "Beyond that there's enough air to keep us alive, and it isn't too desperately cold. If that stuff really is their insulation against cosmic rays, then the entities won't dare follow us beyond the shielded part of the tunnel."

They burst past the last radiance and halted, gasping the thin air into starved lungs, in the darkness beyond.

"Shouldn't we go further back?" Lee asked, trembling.

"I think this is far enough. They'd hardly dare risk even brief exposure to radiation so destructive and so unpredictable. Let's sit down a moment while I try to think what we can do. Tell me how you happened to show up so unexpectedly, Sweet."

When she had finished, he nodded soberly.

"Fate was certainly on your side, Lee. This seems to be an artificial passage. Probably at some time in the past the Vards tried mining operations as far out as the crater wall. It was sheer luck that you dropped into their shaft."

"Those poor Vards," Lee whispered. "I still feel a little ill when I think of how placidly they submit to that cruel slavery simply because they understand that the entities can't feel."

"Lee!" The walls of the tunnel echoed Temple's thunderous shout as he sprang to his feet. "I've got it! I've got the clue I missed before, the clue that kept nagging at me all the time.

"Lee, I know now how the Xacrns can be saved from their next step in evolution. Quick, start yelling for Monj. He's probably gone back to his first body, and I've got to talk to him. I believe I can bargain us all out of this mess."

Their combined shouts echoed down the corridor and were finally echoed by the tramp of approaching feet. A moment later the figure of Monj and his henchmen appeared, flanked by Vards. They hesitated suspiciously, some distance back from the end of the glowing shield.

"Will you to come back and submit now?" Monj demanded harshly. "Or do you prefer to stay where you are until cold and hunger have given you that 'freedom' you defend so strongly?"

"We'll come back," Temple answered grimly, "on our own terms. Monj, I know how to save your race from doom. It's the simplest possible solution but one your science wouldn't discover in a billion eons, simply because it requires certain properties you Xacrns don't possess. Yet your planet is rich in them, only waiting for you to help yourself and find salvation."

"I don't believe it," Monj snapped. "It's a trick to gain your freedom."

But he said it hesitantly, and there

was doubt showing on his face.

"It's no trick," Temple answered. "You know it, too, because you caught a flash of it in my mind and nearly stole it from me then. You know I'm telling the truth.

"If your race had only known or realized that our civilization is based on a different principle than the one of grab-and-conquer—whether some of us act like it or not—you could have had the secret long ago.

"If you had asked, the whole world would have pitched in willingly to help supply what you needed, construct your ship and see you off for home with a new lease on life. Human beings are built that way. They'll never be slaves, never learn the docile fatalism of your native Vards.

"That's why you could bring the whole Xacrn race here and conquer earth without ever actually conquering the human race. You've got to understand that, Monj, in order to understand your own salvation, in order to properly use the tools I can place in your hands."

"What is the secret?" Monj demanded tensely, while his weird companions swayed forward in breathless eagerness. "How can the Xacrn race be prevented from evolving into oblivion?"

"Uh-uh-uh!" Temple relaxed, grinning and waving a reproving finger. "No tickee—no washee, boy. We don't give, we trade.

"When we landed here, both Miss Mason and Rocossen had silver caps. The first thing you'll have to do is get those caps and toss them to us. We want to come out and talk this over with you but not until we're safe against seizure."

THERE was a long, nerve-racking silence. Then a Vard suddenly turned and shuffled back along the corridor. Temple's breath went out gustily.

"The tide turns," he whispered and squeezed Lee's hand.

"Do you really know the answer?" she demanded.

"I really know it, Sweet. The answer to everything."

In a moment the Vard returned, and the two caps were tossed to them. They fitted them on with sighs of relief.

"By the way," Temple demanded. "What happened to Rocossen?"

"He was sent back to earth in the smaller rocket as soon as he recovered. Thanks to your attack, the base we had established there seems too dangerous to maintain until we see what the reaction of your public may be.

Rocossen was equipped with a weapon and instructed to bring back our most valuable instruments and plans. If necessary, we can remain here for a time until affairs are smoothed out. He will return soon."

"You hope," Temple breathed.

They moved warily from their point of safety, but neither the Vards nor the human slaves made any move to attack. In silence they moved back to the great domed hall with its rows of motionless humans. The detector was gone, now, but Temple could still see, in his mind's eye, the endless swarms of hovering free entities, a potential menace to all humanity.

"The secret," Monj cried hoarsely. "Give us the secret, Temple. Quickly!"

"First, how long will it take you to build your ship and take off for Xacrn?"

"With the secret in our possession," Monj's voice range with vibrant hope, "no more than a week. The larger rocket was built to form the hull of the new ship. It needs only the replacement of the crude repulsion power by our space-warp mechanism to make the trip."

"I don't understand it," Temple shook his head. "Your world lies infinite light-years away in space. Even traveling at the speed of light, which we believe is impossible, you would never reach home before millions upon millions of years had elapsed."

"Of course not," Monj said impatiently. "Xacrn is impossibly distant in space and time but not in space-time. With our science, we can so warp the tapestry of space-time that our worlds are no more than a leap apart.

"We shall be home within days, even though as you say, it is impossible for material substance to exceed the speed of light." His hands extended pleadingly.

"But the secret, man! The secret!"

"Will you agree to immediately re-

lease every human slave, withdraw all your fellow-Xacrns from wherever they have been scattered over the earth and restore all Plague victims to normal life?"

"We agree. After all, we have nothing to gain by doing otherwise. We sought only to accomplish our ends in a way that seemed necessary."

"Curt," Lee whispered. "How can you be sure they'll keep any promises they make? After all—"

"I think they'll keep them. There's nothing inherently bad or dishonest in them. They simply know nothing but the achievement of a goal by any means within their power. With that goal reached, their own super-mentality should show them the futility of doing anything but going home."

He faced the thronged slaves and invisible entities, and his voice rang.

"Then I give you the salvation of your race. Decex Vard, come up here by me." When the great Vard had lumbered to his side, he threw an arm across the leathery body. "When you get home, do honor to this Vard, for it was from him I got the clue to your future salvation.

"You Xacrns began as normal body-mind combinations like this Vard but by forced evolution, a part of your race discarded physical bodies and became only super-minds.

"Your doom lies in the fact that you can't stop evolution from carrying your super-minds on into eternal energy. Your salvation lies in halting evolution, retrogressing back to a point below the danger line."

"IS that all you offer?" Monj's voice was harsh with disappointment. "We have recognized that obvious fact and tried for countless ages to accomplish the impossible. It cannot be done. Our minds will not retrogress under any stimulus."

"Oh, but they will," Temple retorted, smiling. "You started existence as a complex bundle of thoughts and emotions. Your ideas and visions and dreams were all inextricably wrapped up in your emotions.

"You started all this evolution in the first place under the driving stimulus of emotions—love and greed and ambition. Then, as you went up the path, you discarded those emotional fibers from your minds at the same time, or even before, you discarded physical bodies.

"You don't know what feelings are today. You can't love or pity or admire. You aren't even actually afraid of your own doom. You simply see it as an undesirable end to mental activity, the only environment you know.

"Monj, the key to your salvation lies in recapturing the lost emotions. You seize bodies, Vard and human, and control them to your wills, but you have never once reached down and actually shared the emotions of that slave.

"You never felt tired when he did, sick when he did. You never knew a surge of happiness when something pleased him or a pang of sorrow when he suffered."

"Certainly not," Monj interrupted stiffly. "We are above those baser—"

"That is your answer!" Temple's voice rang triumphantly. "Of course emotions are crude compared to mental perfection. But you could touch the emotional centers of those captive minds and feel with them if you desired, couldn't you?"

"Of course, but—"

"Then the moment you do—the moment you project baser impulses of raw emotion into your mental plane—you begin to retrogress, don't you? Yet you won't actually lose. You'll gain. You'll merge closer and closer until you and your Vards are again one body-mind and—"

"It is the key—the answer!" Monj shouted suddenly, his face alight. "Retrogression without loss. No Vard will ever slip over the margin into infinite energy. We shall became Vards again, but wiser, more capable Vards."

"And the poor Vards will no longer suffer from their slavery," Lee cried, her eyes shining. "Curt, it means a new order of life for them.

"They never wanted to lose their masters because the masters were a part of them. Now, blended as you suggest, they'll all know happiness. Curt, it's wonderful!"

They stood in smiling silence for a time, knowing without being able to actually see, the ripple of excited

thought-currents flashing among the massed entities. Suddenly Temple frowned.

"Hey! I'm a dope. I forgot to add the demand that we all be transported back to earth again. And if they leave the small rocket behind, our science can use that as the basis for starting interplanetary exploration."

"You shall be returned to your homes," Monj interrupted. "Every human, safe and unharmed. And the rocket, with its equipment, is yours as well. We shall—"

He broke off, reeling back as the dome suddenly reverberated to a resounding crash that rocked the walls. There were lighter crashes, a dull thud and then silence.

"What on earth—" Temple began.

SUDDENLY the mouth of the tube leading out into the rocket hangar erupted figures, grotesque nightmarish forms that staggered and stumbled out into the room.

Temple gaped and then roared with uncontrollable laughter.

The ragged, tattered invaders were his friends. Allen Farge, battered and nearly unclothed, ran in the lead with a battered silver loving cup tied to his head and a shotgun against his hip.

Behind him reeled Mullane, his brain shielded by a shapeless mass of hammered metal from which protruded the unmistakable tines of a silver fork and part of the bowl of a spoon. Next, bruised and blackened, was Jacobs with a jingling mat of silver coins bouncing against his head and a gigantic stillson wrench in his hand.

The last man to stagger in was Rocossen, one arm in a crude sling and a blood-stained bandage surmounting his drawn face.

But he was still able to crinkle his eyes in a grin at the sight of Temple and Lee.

"We're here," Farge croaked, waving the shotgun. "Rocky blasted off in the rocket and then passed out. We steered it by guess and by gosh, and we got lost in space and we finally landed fifty feet away from the landing cradle we were trying to hit—but, by jumping catfish, we landed it, and we're here! Bring on your entities!"

The great rocket drummed steadily on through space, the green globe of the moon dwindling in its smaller vision screen as the red-haloed ball of earth swelled in the larger. The fury of acceleration was past, and its passengers could relax in weightless ease and talk of what had happened.

Farge twisted in the control seat to grin back at Temple and Lee Mason, floating close together.

"You got a long way from your first path, Curt. As I remember it, you told me once you started out to discover why the gods hated Kansas and threw so many stones at it. I still don't get the answer to that.

"The stones were space ships, fired from that pit you showed me by some kind of radiant energy we know nothing about, but why did they all hit Kansas? It's a nice state, I grant you that, but why make it a target for a stone-fight?"

"I took the time to get my first question answered," Temple smiled back. "And it's such a silly simple answer that I actually felt disappointed. The 'gun' that fired those entity-laden rocks at earth was set at an angle that would bring its projectiles into the path of earth's orbit.

"They used, as you say, a form of propellant energy we can't comprehend —but it took the full blaze of sunlight to set off that energy.

"The point where their launching gun was built lay on the floor of Plato, where the sun-line only reaches when the moon is in a certain definite part of its orbit.

"It just happened that when the sunlight fell so they could fire the gun, Kansas happened to lie on that part of the earth that was in the path of the projectile's flight at that particular juncture of time and space."

"I'll be darned!" Farge gasped. "It's an anticlimax, that's what it is."

"Naturally we've been bombarded by other natural stony meteorites from the beginning of time. I imagine we'll find their fall uniform enough to satisfy the laws of chance. It was only the additional bombardment of Kansas that threw us off. But that's over now, thank heaven."

Lee shuddered for a moment in his

arms, and her eyes closed.

They were entering the first reaches of earth's atmosphere, now, and suddenly the screen in front of Farge showed a whipping streak of fire that flashed briefly and was gone.

A meteorite, perhaps no more than a tiny grain of cosmic dust, had flamed and died in its path from the changeless stars.

Farge saw it and recognized it, but remembering the things that had gone before, he decided not to say anything about the meteor.

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE DEVIL'S PLANET

A Full Book-Length Complete Scientifiction Novel of Murder Mystery on Mars

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Girls rave about the shaves you get
With thrifty, keen-edged Thin Gillette.
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Thumbnail Sketches of Great Men and Achievements

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

THE MAGICAL PRISM

IT was the week of the county fair at Stourbridge, England, in the year 1666. Gay booths lined the streets and lanes, colored tents housed curiosities and freaks from all parts of the known world, gaudy Gypsy caravans dotted the green, bearded men from European hinterlands exhibited dancing bears and trained wolves, tumblers and wrestlers abounded. There were refreshments and confections and good old honest English ale to be had for the tuppence.

Everywhere there was laughter and jollity. Lords and ladies and honest townsmen mingled freely with travelers and simple country bumpkins, all intent on seeking diversion, entertainment and excitement.

Strolling through the merry throng, stopping now and then as an exhibit or a puppet show took their fancy for the moment, were two young men from Cambridge. The older of the pair, Isaac, had just the previous year received his degree as bachelor of the arts. He was an earnest and studious

Sir Isaac Newton

young man with lofty brow and deep-set, piercing eyes who, although not yet twenty-four years of age, had already discovered mathematical laws subsequently to be called the binomial theorem and was even now working on the elements of differential calculus which he called Fluxions.

"I say it's high time you had a little recreation, Isaac," spoke his companion, a merry-eyed chap. "Aren't you glad I brought you to the fair? Look yonder—that troupe of Austrian midgets! Isn't that lively one in cap and bells a droll little fellow?"

But Isaac was not listening. Already his eye had been attracted to the booth of a Swiss glass vender. Attracted by the pretty, glittering baubles, he was drifting toward the concession.

"That oddly shaped pendant," he said to the hawker, pointing at the object. "What sort of a crystal is it?"

"That, sir, is a prism glass," responded the Swiss with a heavy accent. "It is cut to imprison all the pretty colors of the rainbow. In the Emperor's palace at Vienna there is a chandelier which has thousands of glasses like this. But I have only this one. It is very cheap—just a shilling, sir."

"I will take it," said Isaac upon sudden impulse.

"What do you want with that cheap piece of glass?" demanded his companion in disgust. "Why don't you buy a genuine diamond?"

Isaac was turning the foolish knick-knack over and over in his fingers, gently rubbing the polished facets of the crystal. "Who knows," he replied, "perhaps the secret of the diamond is locked in here, John."

John snorted and led the way to more concrete pleasures. Isaac smiled tolerantly, put the prism into his pocket, and followed. But his mind was already toying with certain speculations.

What was it that René Descartes had said about colors? What was it Johann Kepler had said in his "Diopterics" about passing a beam of light through a diffusing medium? What had this Swiss hawker just said about the imprisoned colors of the rainbow?

That night Isaac could not sleep for thinking on the problem. Just what real relation did light have to color? How could the colors of the rainbow be imprisoned in a bit of lifeless crystal? Even a diamond did not shine in the dark. It was dull and lusterless until sunlight or candlelight gave it life.

That was it! Sunlight! The young thinker fairly threw himself out of bed and excitedly walked the floor as he waited for day to break. For centuries mankind had been trying to comprehend the secret of light, of sunbeams and rays from the stars. Since the dawn of intelligence man had gazed upon the rainbow and marveled at the colors without understanding them. And that Swiss hawker had prated about them being imprisoned in a soulless crystal.

"Why, I myself, know that light is energy transmitted by wave motion through the medium of ether which pervades space," he said aloud.

For days Isaac wrestled with the problem, going back over the theories of eminent thinkers who had lived before his time. And still he reached no satisfactory conclusion.

And then came that epic day he reverted to the suggestion of Kepler. Why not try to pass a beam of sunlight through this prism he had so idly bought at the Stourbridge Fair and refract the diffused ray for observation?

Tossing his long curls impatiently out of his way, Isaac quickly but deftly arranged his study for the experiment. He darkened the room by closing the door and shutting all the windows.

Then he placed a small table before the window through which the lowering sun shone full at this time of the year. Upon this table he lovingly placed the prism. Then he carefully cut a hole in the lower part of the blind to admit one beam of sunlight.

Trembling now, not with anticipation of the results of this simple experiment, but with the implications of the profound thoughts and theories bubbling up in his mathematical mind, he carefully focused the ray of light upon his prism, much in the manner of a burning glass, and slowly moved the crystal until the refracted rays spread out fanlike across the carpet of the room and impinged on the opposite wall like a fairy polychromatic mist.

Lo! It was not a single beam of white light that glowed upon the wall. It was a broad band of glowing colors. Shaking in his excitement, Isaac stared in wonder. Ranging in order from red on one side to violet on the other, he counted the seven true colors of the spectrum—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

For a long moment he stared, lost in admiration. Then he tried reversing the magic prism, turning it over, shifting its position. He tried the experiment another day. He used another prism which he procured. Another room. And the result was unvarying the same. The seven true colors of the spectrum did not change.

He had proved conclusively that sunlight was not a beam of white light but was composed of seven true colors. There was no life in prisms or diamonds or rainbows or soap bubbles—only the refracted life of the incandescent sun!

"In my judgment," he murmured in awe, "this is the oddest, if not the most considerable detection that has recently been made in the operation of nature."

And he was right. While the secret of reading the stars and their mysterious light by means of the spectroscope lay more than one hundred and eighty years in the future, Sir Isaac Newton had laid the groundwork for the unveiling of the universe and had become the father of the science of astrophysics.

INTO THE STRATOSPHERE

CIRCUS day—about the turn of the century! A sturdy lad of eleven years stood at one side of the enclosure and watched with big eyes as a crew of roustabouts busily stoked an outdoor oven with wood. Suspended over the hot-air vent of the oven was the flapping mouth of a forty-foot balloon.

Already the huge bag was inflating. Gangs of men hung on the guy ropes, steadying and holding the tugging, surging, filling bag. The good-natured crowd thronged around, some laughing, some gazing in awe. But none gazed with greater reverence and excitement than the quiet little lad with the bulging optics.

Professor Zanelli, the great aerialist, the muscular man in tights and with a luxuriant pair of handle-bar mustaches, was going to make his great balloon ascension, perform on the trapeze in his death-defying feat, and then descend to earth by parachute.

At last the great bag was ready. The band struck up a martial air. Bowing grandiosely to his audience, the professor wiped his hands on a white silk handkerchief, gripped the bar of his trapeze, and gave a signal to the boss of the ground crew. The lines were released, and up into the air shot the great bag, carrying the aerialist far into the heavens to the accompaniment of plaudits from the admiring crowd.

The little lad with the big eyes did not applaud; he was too busy watching the ascent of the daring balloonist. He watched until his eyes ached in the warm afternoon sun, until a breeze finally carried the professor, gyrating and acting on his trapeze, out of sight.

And then, perhaps a thousand feet in the air, after the balloon drifted back into view beyond the trees, there was a gasp from the crowd as the doll-like little figure fell from the hot-air bag and plummeted toward the ground. Then, as a woman screamed, a puff of white appeared magically above the free-falling trapeze, and Professor Zanelli drifted safely to earth.

The little lad blinked his eyes and swallowed the lump of excitement in his throat.

"Some day," he vowed to himself, "I'm going to do that. Some day I'm going to go higher than Professor Zanelli."

Time passed, and came World War I. In 1917 the lad, now grown to vigorous manhood, entered the army. In 1920 he was commissioned a captain and assigned to the air service. He flew heavier-than-air machines, but he never forgot his first love—the balloon.

After the war he remained in the U. S. Army in the aeronautics department. He returned to his study of balloons. Becoming proficient, he represented the army in the Gordon Bennett balloon races in 1926, winning second place.

But still he was not satisfied. He still cherished that burning ambition to ascend higher than any other man. And at last, on a cold and bleak day, the second of November, 1927, he made his third and last attempt to break the existing altitude record.

Armed only with a few scientific instruments, clad only in the warmest clothes he could bundle in without too greatly hampering his movements, from Scott Field at Belleville, Ill., he ascended —in an open basket!

Alone and daring, unprotected by the elaborate safeguards and the air-tight gondolas in use today, he made his bid for fame. Up, up, higher into the blue he sailed, dropping ballast, valving his balloon, adjusting his few instruments, striving to reach higher, much as Icarus sought to fly to the sun. Higher than man had ever risen before, up until his nose and ears and fingers froze, until his heart labored and his lungs panted for oxygen, he rose.

Now he was seeing Mother Earth spread out below him as no man had ever seen her before. And higher still he sent his balloon until the bag reached the utmost limit of its lifting power. 42,470 feet, his instrument said. A trifle more than eight miles above sea level.

But he paid the ultimate price for his temerity and daring. His fearless heart could not stand the strain, his lungs could not take in enough oxygen. Bleeding severely at the nose, turning blue from suffocation, he crumpled down after a last look about him. He had made good his boyhood vow, and he died with a slight smile about his lips.

The wrecked balloon was recovered the next day, and the reading taken from his instruments. The man himself was no more. But Captain Hawthorn C. Gray had earned his place among the immortals by being the first man to ascend into the stratosphere!

SCATTER-GUN FOR MICROBES

IT WAS a day in early fall in Baltimore in 1936 and a fog from the bay made the city dismal and gloomy. In the research laboratory of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, oblivious to the external gloom, a young man and a young woman stood at a table and surveyed four groups of very sick white mice. Both of them were doctors, but this was no professional call on the sick, that is, in the accepted sense of the word. For these mice had been made ill at their specific orders.

The laboratory assistant had, some eight hours before, infected the four batches of rodents by shooting them in the belly with four different types of the deadly streptococcus family. Heretofore, this had always been tantamount to a wholesale execution, a purge such as would have given the cruelest tyrant pause. For nobody had even seen a mouse recover from this sort of infection if treatment was delayed more than four hours. And even then the mortality rate was discouraging.

At least, it was to Dr. Perrin Long and Dr. Eleanor Bliss. For they were experts

on the streptococcus and misanthropists on the efficacy of anti-strep serums. But something new had come into their lives. In the summer they had attended the microbiologist's convention in London where they had heard more of the flying rumors about that new German drug called "prontosil".

A chance chat with the English biologist, Ronald Hare, had brought to light the fact that Hare had been at death's door from a strep infection and had been saved by prontosil. Long, noted for his boundless enthusiasm, was at once ready to carry on his research along these new lines. He had dispatched cables and letters home immediately. And now, armed with the complex orange dye called prontosil and a supply of the mother drug from which the dye had been made—a coal-tar product called para-amino-benzene-sulfonamide—he was ready to get down to business with his co-worker.

"How shall we begin, Doctor?" asked Dr. Bliss, surveying the miniature battlefield.

"Setting aside half of each batch for controls," replied Long, "suppose we inject half of the rest with prontosil and treat the remaining half orally with the mother- chemical."

Promptly they set to work, using all possible precautions— for streptococcus was a deadly foe to both mice and men. Subcutaneously half of the selected sick mice were shot with prontosil S. The other half were given the mother-compound with the jaw-breaker name by way of mouth. Then the rest was simple.

They had already tested the chemical across the deadly microbe in the test tube and found that it merely inhibited the growth of the germs for about eighteen hours—after which Mr. Strep began to multiply fruitfully by the millions. Jumping this unsatisfactory negative test, Drs. Long and Bliss had proceeded to the use of their own old living test tubes, mice.

Every hour they drew a drop of blood swarming with streptococci from each mouse to examine under the microscope and possibly cast a short-term horoscope for Mr. Rodent. And then, suddenly, the miracle happened. On that microscopic battlefield there appeared — between studies—an attacking wave of phagocytes, the blood's army of microbe-eating white cells.

Repelled up to now by something about the ferocious streptococci, the phagocytes had recovered their fighting morale and were devouring the malignant enemy left and right.

"What do you make of that?" murmured Dr. Bliss, amazed.

Long himself was somewhat perplexed. "It seems that the chemical, in itself not deadly to strep, must soften 'em up enough and paralyze their output of poison so that the phags will attack."

Hour after hour the pair of intent workers followed the progress of the raging battle, their map a microscopic field, their artillery hypodermic syringes, their battleground tiny drops of mousey blood. Never did any staff of generals check a war more closely.

And then, hours later, the two indefatigable researchers smiled wearily at each other. The battle had been won. Eight out of every ten mice treated recovered. All of the control mice died.

Now at last Dr. Long waxed enthusiastic.

"Doctor Bliss," he cried, his eager eyes shining, "at last we have the greatest drug discovery since Erhlich's magic bullet."

It was on the eighth of September that this first experiment was completed. Upon that day there came to the laboratory a grave-faced physician. He had heard of the research work the two young scientist doctors were following.

"Dr. Long," he said anxiously, "I am a baby doctor. I have a little patient, eight years old. She is dying of erysipelas. I've tried everything—transfusions, antitoxins —all I can think of, and she is going to die. Will this prontosil stuff work?"

The Long family had always been long on doctors. Without stopping to weigh the consequences, Long let his medical sympathies outrun his scientific caution.

He grabbed up a satchel full of supplies and hurried with the doctor of pediatrics to the hospital where the little patient lay at the mercy of the deadly disease. At once he set work on this new battlefield. Risking everything on what his common sense told him, Dr. Long administered the new-old drug.

Trembling, the two men watched through the hours, and, having cast the die, administered prontosil every four hours. They were risking their reputations, possibly their very futures on this daring treatment.

Then, within eight hours the deadly flame of erysipelas waned on that little cheek. Phagocytes mobilizing. Watch the temperature, nurse. Was this new-old chemical going to prove a shotgun for all sorts of bacterial diseases?

Thirty-six hours passed. It was like a lifetime. And then—the miracle had happened again. Free from the terrible fever, the child began to mend rapidly. She recovered, to be the first human patient treated with prontosil in the United States.

Once more science had triumphed, research and hope and prayer had been rewarded. The way was yet long and arduous and the end was not yet.

Dr. Long had many a weary hour to spend in experiment and research and education. There were to be fatalities, detours, medical objections, but the way was opening for the miracle treatment of streptococcus infection, arthritis, childbed fever, staphylococci, pneumonia, meningitis, and others.

"Thank God, Dr. Long!" breathed the baby doctor when the terrible vigil was over. "Let's go have a cup of coffee. What did you say was the name of the mother-chemical?"

"It is becoming generally known as sulfanilamide," answered Dr. Long simply. "And I know now that several hundred mice have served a good purpose by their deaths."

LAST LAUGH

By ROBERT BLOCH

Author of "The Man Who Walked Through Mirrors," "The Curse of the House," etc.

Angus Breen, choking with fear, faced the bodiless head of Martin Vail

Angus Breen Exiled Martin Vail to a Death on a Runaway Planet—But His Ambitions Ran Away With Him!

ANGUS BREEN, controller of the Cosmic Research Division of Interplanetary Colonies, Incorporated, laughed pleasantly as he brushed his hair. Why shouldn't he laugh? He was preparing to sit down to a hearty breakfast. But that wasn't all. Today was the last possible day in the time limit set that Martin Vail could return from Hystero to prevent Breen's legal acquisition of his properties, insurance, and inventions.

Of course, Breen had promptly taken over things after Vail's departure. Everything belonging to his brilliant subordinate was now in Breen's control. But today made possession absolutely legal. So Angus could well afford to smirk at his fat-faced reflection in the mirror and laugh out loud.

Suddenly the laugh choked in his throat, the smirk froze on his features. In his ears there sounded an ear-splitting crash outside his window, a crash that jarred and shook every beam in his ornate penthouse residence. A stratosphere liner or a small space ship had landed in his backyard.

Offhand, this statement would seem

silly. Not to Controller Angus Breen. The pudgy little controller's back yard was a mile-square area atop the gigantic Cosmic Research Plant, and the experimental space vessels returning from the exploration of other planets came to rest there regularly. But they didn't come down with a crash—*and they didn't appear unscheduled!*

Angus Breen scowled and put down his hairbrush. If some drunken intruder had landed by mistake on the scientific sanctuary of his roof—well, the interloper was slated to lose his license, that was all. The controller's pudgy face creased unpleasantly as he strode toward the glass wall that was his window. He stared out at the crumpled hulk lying on the sodded roof yards away from the nearest landing cradle.

"Well, I'll—I'll be e t e r n a l l y damned!" exclaimed Mr. Breen, his fat features whitening.

A pretty accurate prediction, at that. For Controller Breen was an excellent candidate for damnation, although nobody on Earth knew that. But right now he was a better candidate for stark amazement. He was looking at something he had never expected to see again.

Martin Vail's space ship! Vail—the scientific explorer he had sent to certain death. Vail, who had been commissioned to land on Hystero!

HYSTERO—aptly named, because it had appeared out of nowhere to disrupt the Pleiades, whirling in a gaseous orbit that betokened its arrival as a strange, cosmic intruder in the galaxy.

Breen had sent Vail to explore Hystero, knowing that he would die. The planet had never been observed, let alone studied. Its surface conditions were unknown. It appeared in imminent danger of exploding, this runaway planet from another system passing by the Solar family like a ship steaming past an island.

So Breen had sent Vail there "for the sake of Science." And after sending him, went home and appropriated Vail's properties. He knew that Vail would never come back.

Yet here he was.

Here was the ship, a long silver splinter resting on the roof. A dagger thrown from the sky. A dented dagger—for the sides of the vessel were scarred and pitted by the meteoric stones of space. The entire surface appeared to be crusted with a congealed, silvery fuzz, attesting to the heat and friction of the voyage.

Controller Angus Breen didn't take a second look. He buzzed the Observation Tower to signal that he knew of the vessel's arrival, and barked a brief message. "Don't send a crew up. I'll take over myself."

No one else must witness this meeting between himself and Vail. Vail had returned, and if he should suspect now why he had been sent—

Breen buckled on his drug-gun, felt for the clip of opium needles with which it was loaded. He might face violence.

"Well, let's get it over with," the fat Controller muttered, as he strode out on the roof.

Wind fluttering his white jacket, he waddled up to the ship's side. The port was sealed. There was a lever on the side, but Breen, impatient as he was, didn't pull it at once. He knew the heat generated by the friction of speed through space; could feel it radiating yet from the ship's silver sides. Pulling out his gloves, he let his asbestos-clad fingers release the catch and throw out the metal ladder leading up to the port. He climbed, pulling out his master-key—for ordinarily the ports of a spaceship can be opened only from the inside. Safety measure.

Only men like Controller Breen had master keys. Only men like Controller Breen could send others to their death in space ships. . . .

But Angus Breen didn't want to think about that. He had supposed Vail dead, and now he had come back, alive. Sometimes plans go wrong.

"Get it over with," he muttered again, clutching his drug-gun. Then he pulled the airlock door open and hauled his heavy body up until he could step inside.

A breath of synthetic air smote him as his feet touched the floor of the ship's interior. It was dark. He

snapped on the lights.

The long narrow cabin was immaculate. No signs of scarring, no inner damage. No signs of life, either. At one end of the little chamber was the great silver control-board. Before it was the piloting chair. But where was Vail?

The cot was empty, the bunks untenanted. Had the ship returned *alone?* Why wasn't Vail at the door to greet him? After a month's confinement in these steel prisons poised in space, men usually were clamoring for release. Breen had seen them babbling with ecstasy as they fought their way out to solid earth.

But no Vail. Only the empty chamber, the chair, and the control-board.

Angus Breen's eyes cut through the glare. And then he saw the back of Vail's head, over the top of the piloting chair that faced the controls.

"Vail!" he barked.

The head didn't move.

Was he unconscious? Was he—this would be almost too much to hope for—dead?

Breen didn't know. "Vail!" he called again.

And then something rustled in the shadows of a wall shelf. Angus Breen nearly jumped out of his skin—no mean feat, considering his weight.

Then he relaxed. Vail, sentimentalist, had taken his cat, Comet, on the voyage. Comet jumped down from the shelf and Breen saw horror.

The cat, the gray cat, walking on mincing feet across the floor, had no head!

It was a headless feline that blundered over the surface of the cabin, and in a ghastly moment arched its back and rubbed its living fur against Controller Breen's leg.

Breen shuddered terribly, forced himself to look down at the apparition. He saw where the neck ended in a little silver cap, like the cover of a tin can. One or two wire ends stuck up from the interior of the silver cap. But the beast was headless. Headless—yet alive!

It was to escape this monstrosity that Breen moved toward the controls. He wasn't thinking so vividly of Vail, and he almost unconsciously put out his hand to pat Vail on the shoulder over the back of the piloting chair.

His groping hand encountered—nothing.

He felt again, eyes still on that headless horror of a cat. Again his hands met empty air. Vail's head did not turn.

And Angus Breen, choking with startled fear, moved around until he faced the front of the piloting chair.

Faced—*the bodiless head of Vail!*

Clamped with steel sutures against the top of the chair, fastened with a system of cords and wires leading from the severed neck, throat studded with glass and rubber tubing, the head of Martin Vail stared up at Angus Breen with a glassy smile.

Controller Breen stared back, stared into open eyes, open mouth. Stared, and stared, and stared—

"HOW are you, Breen?"

No. That couldn't be. The lips moving, and the metallic voice that wasn't Vail's, coming from Vail's throat.

"What's the matter, Breen? Surprised?"

"Y—yes—" whispered Breen.

"Never thought you'd see my face again, eh? Well, that's just about all you are seeing, at that."

"Vail—don't joke about this."

"Joke? That's what it is, isn't it? A joke." The face smiled.

Breen stared into the smiling visage with a sick dread in his heart. Vail's expression had changed. No, his hair hadn't turned white overnight, and there was no network of wrinkles etched in agony. The change was the agony in the eyes, and yet they were laughing. The fat man shivered.

He saw where the silver wires entered the neck like shining strands of veins and arteries; saw that they extended down into the seat of the piloting chair, which appeared to have been scooped out and then re-covered after the wires had been run through them.

The eyes of the head suspended in space stared into his, following his glance.

"Clever, isn't it? Looks crude—like the early Russian experiments we used to read about in school. They

used a saline solution for dogs' heads, or something of the sort, didn't they? This is much better."

Angus Breen didn't look as though he thought this was much better. He could only gaze in fear at the decapitation that spoke.

It wasn't Vail's voice. What does speech sound like without lungs? It was a metallic burr. That silver tubing in the throat might account for it.

The nostrils didn't move. No breathing. Chemical life. Bloodstream fed through wires and tubing. A self-sustaining solution.

Fragments of chemical biology filtered through Breen's brain. Just fragments, filtering through the greater bulk of the pure horror which held it. "Vail—what happened? Why—this?"

Vail laughed. The head on the clamps atop the chair shuddered. "Sorry, but it *hurts* to laugh. I forget that sometimes; you understand?"

Breen nodded. Understand—how could he understand? He wanted to run; wanted to tear his eyes away from that living head and flee. He had made that head what it was by sending Vail on that perilous mission. Vail's eyes showed he knew that. And while the head couldn't harm him, Angus Breen was still afraid.

"Go on," said Controller Angus Breen, hoarsely. "Go on."

"I followed your orders, and the temporary charting," droned the metallic voice. "The voyage itself doesn't matter. Oh, I know you're interested. I thought it was important myself at the time. Took it all down in the chart-book. So if you want details, look there. The whole of the observations are recorded.

"But they're not important to me any more. And I doubt if they'll be important to you, after you hear the rest of my story. Who wants to read a roadmap that leads to Hell?"

That metallic whinny could only be laughter, Breen knew. It sickened him.

"I have something else to tell you, Breen. About Hystero itself. I landed, you know. The surface is solid enough, and after a preliminary observation I saw that oxygen masks wouldn't be necessary. That's how Comet happened to leave the ship and come along with me."

VAIL'S eyes indicated the cat. Breen glanced down, saw the headless creature with the tin-can over an empty throat. A feeling of being in a nightmare came over him. Vail was buzzing on.

"I'll condense it. Hurts to talk, and nothing's important except my message. Hystero is inhabited. By *men*, if you choose to call them that."

Breen got excited. "Men? Why, there's never been another body discovered that has men on it! Vail—do you realize what this discovery may mean?"

"Yes," said the head. "But you don't. Not yet. There are some men one doesn't *bother* too much. Nor *study*. I didn't think so at first. I thought I'd blundered into a higher race. They had cities, you know, and a civilization. They wore clothes, and talked, and communicated in other ways.

"That's how they understood me, Breen. Telepathic communication. Their speech is too difficult to learn. Other habits are difficult to understand, too—but it isn't important to talk about them."

"What do you mean, it isn't important?" Angus Breen exploded. Already avarice was overcoming his initial fear. Why, publicization of this discovery would make him famous! "Why, everything about this new planet and race is important."

"No," said the head of Vail. "Only one thing is important. What they did to me." The drone in the voice deepened. So did the dreadful intensity of Vail's stare. It held Breen's eyes riveted.

"You see what they did to me," Vail said. "Do you know why?"

"No."

"For a joke."

"Joke?"

"Yes. Now do you understand? These are men, but men far in advance, mentally, of earthly beings. Minds above so much that interests us and our lesser intelligences. For example, on Hystero there is no music,

no art. Those beings read no books. Their minds are beyond that; they find no stimulation in the *synthetic*.

"They are no longer interested in what we call 'civilization.' They don't want to build higher buildings any more, or bigger factories, or make more 'money.' They are quite above those qualities we call 'patriotism' or 'idealism' or even 'love'—though they understand such mental attitudes perfectly."

"What *do* they find interest in?" Breen asked.

"Jokes."

"Jokes?" Breen echoed weakly.

"Yes. And since there is cruelty in humor, and a certain reality, they are cruel. As the ancient Roman emperors who had everything became cruel in their humor. Like Caligula. They have a sense of irony.

"I found that out. Here was I, a stranger from another world. Did they fear me? No—for they were too clever to know fear. Did they worship me, like savages? Again, no. Their reactions were not our human reactions at all. Nor did they study me. They weren't even curious. The intricate science of their civilization no longer exists as a means of *learning*. They wanted to use it only to play a joke."

VAIL paused an instant, as though to draw breath—breath no longer needed. "That's what they did to me, Breen. They played with me, like a child plays with its toys. They took Comet, here, and examined her. There are no animals on Hystero. And they began to experiment. You see what that experiment leads to, don't you?

"They wanted to keep this strange living thing animate after removing its brain. A sort of puzzle for them, a game. That kind of curiosity, the same curiosity which men used to manifest centuries ago when they took automobiles and radios apart, tinkered with them, and put them back together again. So they did that to Comet. And they did *this* to me!"

Breen shivered as he saw the eyes of the head, saw them moisten with ghastly tears.

Vail went on, with a terrible smile.

"So you've had your way, Breen, haven't you?"

"What—what do you mean?"

"You sent me out there knowing I'd be killed, didn't you?"

"No—no—"

"Oh, why bother to lie? I can't harm you now, can I?"

Breen couldn't check a grin that broke through. That was true. He fingered his drug-gun. There was no danger in Vail any more. There was, instead, a definite value. Breen thought of calling in the scientists, all his fellow-workers and superiors. Exhibiting Vail's head. Telling the story. Conducting a research of the processes that kept him alive, bodiless. Perhaps mastering the technique himself. It was all simple chemistry, biology, and surgery.

Why not? And meanwhile, Vail's possessions were his.

There were just a few things he wanted to find out first. He might as well admit it.

"I guess you're too clever for me, Vail?" he chuckled. "It's true. I didn't think you'd come back. But there was nothing underhanded in my sending you—I swear it. You were the best, the bravest; you had the endurance. And I'm glad you made it. Glad, even in spite of your—accident."

"It was no 'accident' as you call it." The droning laugh was mirthless. "Any more than it was an 'accident' that I came back."

"Yes, I meant to ask about that. Why did they let you go? Why did they send you back?"

"Because of their sense of humor," said Vail. "They sent me back to kill you."

"Kill me? Why?" Breen was shocked, trembling unaccountably.

"I told them the story. Told them you sent me. How they laughed at me. They psycho-analyzed you — through me. Turned you inside out. They proved to me that you never expected me to return, that your motive was to steal my parabola warp and my property. Do you deny it?"

THE fool! He *knew!* Breen's pudgy fingers tightened on the drug-gun. Then he smiled. He re-

alized he had nothing to fear from a mere bodiless head, clamped to a metal chair. "So they let you go," he whispered. "Like this."

"Yes. When I got over the shock and saw the humor of it I told them what a fine situation it would be. What a glorious *joke*. The idea, you see, appealed to their prime instinct —their sense of humor. That's why they let me come back to kill you."

Now Breen knew. Vail was mad. Those eyes proved it.

"Sense of humor, see Breen? You didn't expect me. Seeing me like this would startle you, then make you confident I was out of the way. And I'd talk to you. Tell you what masters of surgery and chemistry these creatures were. How they could control the body. How they could make a cat live without a head. How they could make a head live without a body. How they could keep a heart beating or a leg moving without any other control than the proper wires and tubes. And I knew you'd listen; would believe me without guessing what I was driving at. And that I could kill you.

"That's what I've been thinking about. A month is a long time to go on this way, living as I have. Looking out into space and watching the chart as I came back. Knowing what I was, remembering my agony—only one thing kept me going. The thought of killing you. I have acquired some of *their* sense of humor now, you see. The time has come for me to laugh."

"You—" Breen spluttered. "You can't kill me. You can't move!"

"How did you think I got the ship back through space?" whispered Vail. "My head *directed* it, yes. But brains, with all the Hysteroan surgical cunning, can't make a ship steer by thought alone."

"What steered your ship?" Breen whispered.

The answer loomed suddenly behind him, a horrible answer that gripped Breen's throat and pressed and choked his life away. While he had been talking with Vail's head, Vail's great body had come silently forward from the after part of the ship, functioning precisely like the body of the cat, and had seized him. The horrified controller stared at the ghastly monstrosity with a silver cap instead of a head on the neck stump—a thing animated by the diabolic surgery of a strange and runaway planet —a hulking horror that was strangling him to death. . . .

Breen was almost dead when, through the roaring in his ears, he heard the head of Martin Vail laugh. At the same moment he felt one groping paw of the headless monstrosity release his throat and slide down to grip his right hand and start jerking it up and down.

"Yes," cackled the head of Vail, "a marvelous sense of humor. We all have it. You sent me to my death. They cut off my head. So I told them I'd come back to Earth on one condition—that they'd fix it so I could *shake hands with you again.*"

The laughter rose madly long after Breen's life had ebbed away. And in the darkening cabin of the space ship the headless body continued, automatically, to pump Breen's dead hand in a gesture of greeting.

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

SCIENCE ?? Question ?? BOX

CHEMURGY AND HYDROPONICS

Editor, SCIENCE QUESTION BOX:
Just what is the difference between these two new branches of science—chemurgy and hydroponics?—D. B., Little Rock, Ark.

Briefly, chemurgy's basic purpose is to advance the use of farm materials in industry through three mediums—new uses for current crops, new markets for wastes and by-products, and new crops for new or already established uses. Chemurgy deals with a science of the soil.

Hydroponics, on the other hand, is the method of crop production through the use of a liquid medium, hence, the name hydro, from water.

Shallow trays are filled with water, reenforced with the required various nutrient salts, and a seedbed of vegetable matter, sometimes even excelsior, is prepared on a wire netting just above the chemicalized water. Great strides have been made in this soilless sort of agriculture since 1927. The Heinz Company had a splendid exhibit at the New York World's Fair, 1939 and 1940; a series of tanks grow certain vegetables on the otherwise unarable Wake Island for the Pacific clipper ships, and many private individuals have their own hydroponical gardens on roof tops.

Contrary to popular belief, this science is not new, nutrient solutions having been used extensively to grow plants in experimental studies for the greater part of the past seventy-five years.

MONAZITE

Editor, SCIENCE QUESTION BOX:
What is monazite and how is it used?—W. M., Tucson, Ariz.

Monazite is an ore produced from Brazil, the Dutch East Indies, and India. It was formerly in demand as a source of thorium for the old-style incandescent gas mantles. Falling gradually into disuse due to the advent and growth of electric lighting, it has of late years become of increased importance by the use of thorium in radio tubes. The greatest output comes from Travancore, India. The United States imports an average of better than a million pounds per year of this substance.

THE ELECTRONIC MICROSCOPE

Editor, SCIENCE QUESTION BOX:
How does the electronic microscope work?—J. J., Raleigh, N. C.

In this instrument a beam of high speed electrons is used instead of ordinary light, the electrons being focused in suitable magnetic fields instead of the usual lenses. Without going into a complicated discussion on the construction of the instrument, briefly, it works thus:

The smallest object which can be seen through an ordinary microscope must have a length or size comparable to the wave length of the light used. Down in the smallness beyond this point light simply fails to reach. With ordinary light this limit is about three or four hundred thousandths of an inch. Electron waves are so much shorter than light waves that magnifications of twenty thousand diameters are possible, and probably more.

This instrument promises to be a wonderful boon in the future study of filterable viruses, the structure of bacteria, the composition of metals, etc.

SIZE OF THE EARTH

Editor, SCIENCE QUESTION BOX:
How did the ancients compute the size and weight of the earth?—S. J. L., Peoria, Ill.

There were doubtless several ingenious methods employed, the ancients proving quite adroit without the use of the modern precision scientific instruments. One method employed by an early Greek philosopher was to start with the premise that Earth was a sphere. Next, he imagined a line girdling its surface, on the order of our present equator, save that it passed through two cities on the same meridian, or whose latitudes and longitudes were known to him. Thanks to tax collectors who meticulously measured every mile, he knew the precise distance between the two towns. Computing the curvature of the earth for this distance, by checking meridian shadows with the sun, he had the scant arc of a section of his imaginary line. By simple geometric formulae he computed the line to be approximately twenty-five thousand miles long, and thus worked out the volume of the sphere.

True, he was wrong by miles and thousands of tons, but it is remarkable how narrow was his margin of error.

In this department the editors of STARTLING STORIES will endeavor to answer your questions on modern scientific facts. Please do not submit more than three quesions in your letter. As many questions as possible will be answered here, but the editors cannot undertake any personal correspondence. Naturally, questions of general interest will be given the preference. Address your questions to SCIENCE QUESTION BOX, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York City.

THE BONELESS HORROR

By DR. DAVID H. KELLER

Author of "No More Friction," "The Toad God," etc.

I

THE Emperor of Gobi sat proudly on his marble throne.

Below him on the Steps of the first Magnitude sat the Seven Wise Men, on whom the Emperor depended for the welfare of his realm and the continued power of his dynasty.

On the other Steps of Magnitude, of two down to seven, stood the nobles of the realm, all of them selected because of some brilliant achievement adding to the splendor of Gobi.

One after the other the Seven Wise Men read from parchment scrolls the record of their departments for the past month, and the Emperor praised them all for what they had done. Especially did he give credit to the Royal Mathematician, the Royal Engineer and the Royal Geographer; for these three men, separately and in unison, presented the plans they had prepared for the destruction of the Land of Mo, that great Kingdom of the South, which dared to dispute with Gobi the supremacy of the world.

The Emperor of Gobi had issued orders that Mo must not only be conquered, but actually destroyed, and for months the three Wise Men in charge of these departments of Mathematics, Engineering and Geography had studied over the problem. Now, they had a plan—a good plan, and at the end of it Mo would be no more.

There was one flaw in the beauty of the plan; namely, the time needed to accomplish it. Tunnels had to be dug under the sea and beneath the great gulfs of water, separation had to be made of Mo from Gobi. Even though all of the slaves and all the machinery and the great skill of Gobi were put to work, many years would pass before the desired end would be accomplished.

So, the face of the Emperor darkened. He was now passing his fifty-ninth birthday, and he knew that ere thirty more years faded away he and his Seven Wise Men, and all who had helped him make Gobi great, would be worm food and dust in their golden coffins, or else so old that their greatest worry would be the dragging of decrepit bodies through another day. Of all his illustrious fathers, but one thing remained certain; that was that they lived a while and then died.

Thinking thus, his face grew hard and sad, and he chewed the end of his mustache in such a way as to make the Royal Barber tremble. Finally he cried:

"All of your plans are folly and your thoughts foolish vanity, for who of us will be here to see this ending of our enemy thirty years from now? What comfort if a few of us live, yet lack the mental power to glory in our triumph? Give us youth, take away from us the weight of the years gone by, and there would be satisfaction in the perfecting of your plans.

"Give me youth! Take from my shoulders the weight of years, from my head the whitened hair, from my face the little wrinkles, fateful handwriting of Time the Conqueror. Then you can destroy Mo. Which of you Seven Wise Men can make a man young?"

Silent, the Seven looked at each other, fiddling their fingers and toying nervously with the dragonian rings, emblem of the immortality, that they believed in but

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EDITOR'S NOTE

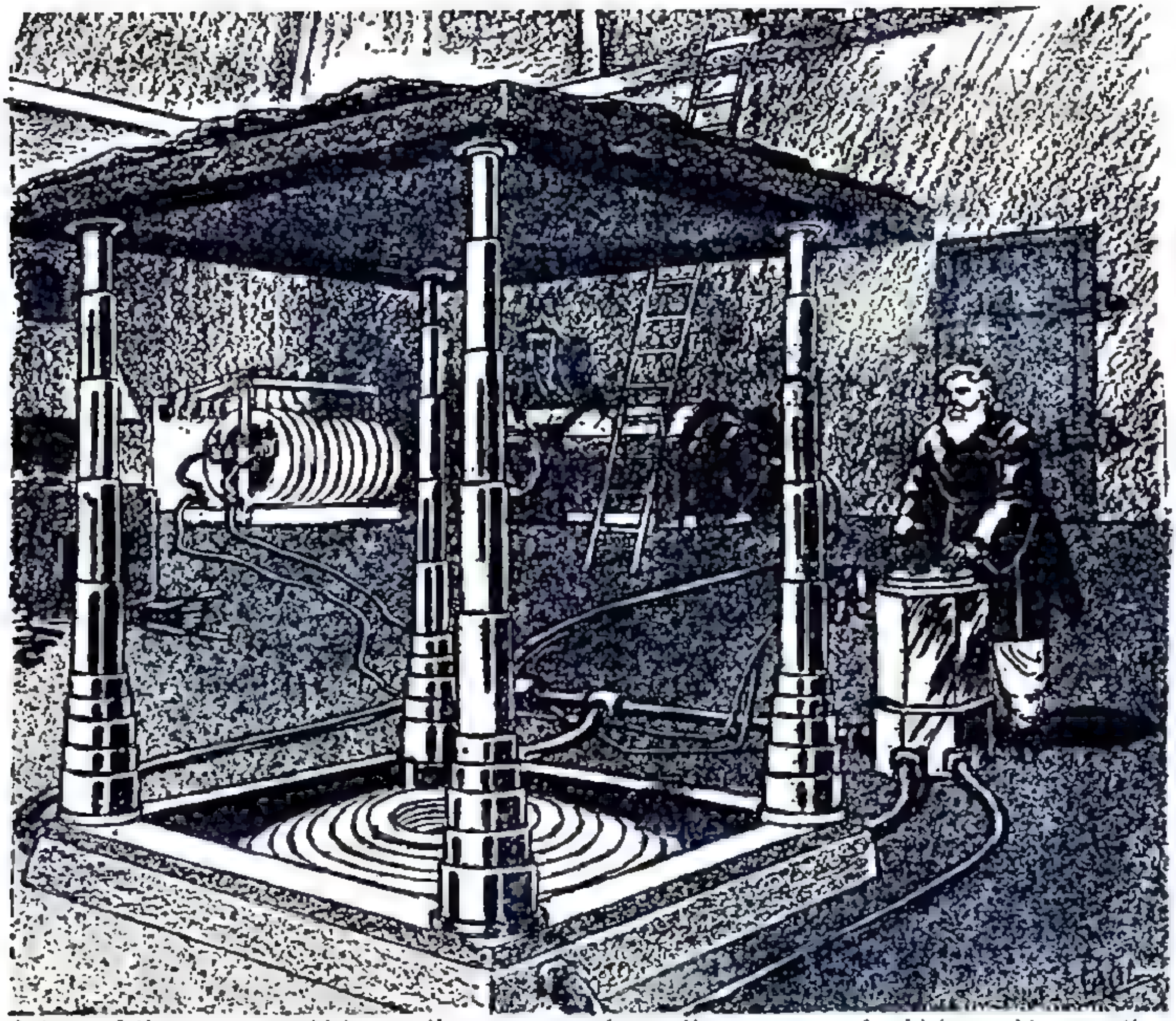
Some stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "The Boneless Horror" by Dr. David H. Keller, has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL OF FAME.

In each issue, for several forthcoming numbers, we will reprint one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time, as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new prominence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

A Fantasy Masterpiece Nominated



A turn of the screw would loosen the compressed air, the pressure of which would raise the map thirty feet into the air. As the map would rise, so would all of Gobi.

lacked. The dragon, swallowing his tail in the never-ending, ever-beginning symbol of fadeless youth, made the golden ring sacred to the Seven and to their Emperor who had a like ring—carved from a single garnet, while theirs were only gold.

Then the ruler from His throne commanded that seven of his slaves be brought in. These he had his Chief Executioner kill in seven various ways, by the silken cord, decapitation, the bleeding from the wrists, the pouring of molten lead in the ear, the golden needle stuck slowly past the eyeball, the placing of one drop of poison on the tongue, and finally, the frightful death by command, wherein the Mighty Ruler orders that the man die, and he dies from fear of being disobedient.

When the seven dead bodies of the slaves lay stretched on the floor of the palace, the Emperor rose and whispered:

"I can give death, but I cannot make myself live on till I see the ending of Mo. Seven Wise Men; am I Ruler?"

The seven bowed low before him.

"Then pay attention. Meet me in three months, and at that time tell me how to prolong my life tenfold so I can glory in the conquering of the country that I hate so much. Do this, or I shall kill the Seven Wise Men, and other men will take their dragonian rings. And the manner of your death shall not be as easy as was that of these seven slaves. You shall be weeks in the ending of life, and all that time you shall have due cause to reflect over your lack of intellect in that you could not make me live on long enough to glory in the fall of Mo. You are all wise men, and you have worked well for the Land of Gobi, but all of your wisdom will not suffice unless you give this immortality to me."

BOWING their heads, they withdrew from his presence, stepping aside so that their silken robes should not touch the dead bodies of those who had died to teach

them how they could go on living.

Other slaves came and removed the carrion, and the Nobles left the great hall. At the last, only the Emperor sat there. He rang a gong, and at that summons came the High Priest, a man who knew all the wisdom of the Gods, and what he did not know he would not admit.

The Emperor permitted him to sit near him.

"Tell me again, Norazus," the Emperor asked, "about the dragon whose ring I wear."

"This dragon lives far to the north of Gobi," the High Priest began. "He lives perpetually with his tail in his mouth, thus, never reaching either an ending or a beginning, but going in a circle which is an emblem of eternity, of immortal life. Yet is he nothing like everlasting, for every seventh year he lays seven eggs in the sands of the desert.

"Of these seven he selects one which he swallows, hatching it out in the heat of his stomach. When it ripens, the new dragon eats the old one and emerges from his inner gut. But his body is the soul of the old dragon and in his head the wisdom of the ages. And, thus, is the life of the dragon renewed every seven years by means of a new body, but the skin of the old dragon lies dried and bloodless on the ever-shifting sands."

"A pretty tale, Norazus, but is it true?"

The two men looked at each other. Then the Priest whispered:

"What if I showed you eggs of the dragon, some of the six that he discards and leaves to turn to stone?"

"Eggs or stone, what boots it? How can you tell the dragon egg from the giant auk, or the dodo, or other birds that my wise men prate of?"

"Some things must be taken on faith."

"What is that? A bubble for children. We are wise. I wear this dragon ring because it is the emblem of power. My father and his before him wore this ring, but we must seek elsewhere for life everlasting. The dragon may know how to renew himself, but we cannot use his power."

"Have you benefited from the daily blood of a new-born child?"

"Not much. In fact, I fear it has harmed my appetite. The meals are not as good as they were before I took this tonic. Several times I have belched, making necessary the death of my cook.

"No, Norazus, let us wait till the Seven Wise Men report on their method of prolonging life. Whatever they devise I will share with you and with them. But we shall never learn the secret of the dragon or of the salamander or of the phoenix, who buildeth a fire for a new life through the burning of the old body. Not in such forms must we seek added years. And I must live to see the ending of Mo."

At that time there were three great Empires in the world. Atlantis occupied all of the land west of Ireland, an island reaching far west, till from its furthermost shores the coast of America showed as a purple haze on the horizon. From this country went emigrants to Egypt, Greece and other lands of the Barbarians, bordering on the Great Sea.

The Empire of Mo filled in all the great waste that is now covered by the waves of the Pacific. To the west, it was separated from Asia by three hundred miles of water, but on its eastern borders it was almost in touch with Central America. It had colonies all through North and South America, the largest of these being in Central America. Some of these colonies were commercial; others were to spread the service of the ALL-GOOD-GOD, whom they worshiped diligently; and one, in the valley of the Colorado River, where Arizona now stands, was intended for a city of refuge, if at some future time (as the dismal priests believed) all of Mo should be destroyed.

The third great Empire was Gobi. This kingdom occupied all of Asia, at that time a low land covered with fertile plains and dark forests. There were little rolling hills, but the Himalayas still slumbered unborn in the womb of the earth.

Of these three countries one gave, before its destruction, of its learning to Egypt, which in turn made the culture of Greece possible. Mo, most brilliant of all three as far as learning was concerned, died so quickly that nothing remained save a dim memory in the places where once her people had ruled in their might. While Gobi, shattered by a grim cataclysm, managed to live on in the cold country of Thibet.

The three lands died together. Man lived, forced by circumstance to forget all that these countries ever knew, and had to learn it all over again. Gradually, humanity rose again in the scale of civilization, and by the time fourteen thousand years had passed man had relearned perhaps half of what he knew before he had destroyed the three fairest empires the world had ever seen.

II

AT the end of three months the great men of Gobi met again, but this time no plenteous splendor marked their gathering. Secretly they met by night in the bowels of the earth, many feet under the Palace in a room that only a few of each generation knew of and which none ever dared to name above a whisper. It was a room of black marble.

Around the walls were nine dragons of red stone, and from their eyes came a glow that lit the room. In the belly of each dragon was a seat. Thus, there was a seat for the Emperor and one for each of the Seven Wise Men and one for the High Priest. On the floor sat a blond man of about thirty. His eyes were blue, his hair flaxen, and there was an unafraid look on his face, for on him there were neither bonds nor fetters.

The Chief of the Navy of Gobi began the tale of the stranger.

"Oh, Most Illustrious Emperor, Representative of the Dragon in human form and Wearer of the ring, when you commanded us to find for you the secret of longevity if not that of immortality, each of us went

his varied way to find the answer to your command. To me came the inspiration to search the sea between our land and Mo, in the hope that among the prisoners whom I might capture there would be a man learned in the art and sciences of the cursed country of our enemies. In order to examine those whom we captured, I took in our fleet one of our learned men and other men, skilled in obtaining the truth from such persons, no matter how unwilling they are to disclose it.

"We cruised for some weeks, and took several vessels which had sailed too far from Mo for their safety. Of those whom we captured, we killed the most, either as ignorant folk or else stubborn ones who died when the tormentors began work on them. However, we were fortunate in obtaining one of their physicians who, when he found what we wanted, claimed the power to lengthen life. This man you see here, if his ability is equal to his boasts, can prolong the life of your Highness."

The Emperor looked thoughtfully into the face of the young man. After a long pause he asked:

"Have any of you Seven Wise Men questioned him to find wherein his power to prolong life lies?"

"We have done so, Your Highness," replied the Royal Physician, he who knew more about the healing arts than any other man in the realm. "I talked over the matter with him. His method has all the elements of philosophical truth in it."

"But will it really work to the lengthening of life?"

"That cannot be said without a trial."

Again silence, filled with suspense, covered those in the mystic room, the sacred Hall of the Dragons. And then the Emperor asked the young man:

"Are you a man from the land of Mo?"

"No, I come from far away Atlantis."

"How came you in a ship of Mo?"

"Years ago, as a child, I was taken prisoner from my home. Since then I have lived in Mo. They found in me astonishing aptitude for drugs and magical healings, so they taught me all they knew. Of all the young men in their college of medicine, none learned more than I. When I was taken by your ship, I was voyaging to a far land to heal a mighty man of his disease."

"So you have no tie of love for Mo?"

"Why should I? They killed my family and took me from the home of my childhood."

"Would you stay with us?"

"One place now is as good as another, since I cannot be a free man."

"Suppose I make you free? Give you a place at my right hand?"

"It would all depend on what was in your right hand," answered the young physician sagely. "I have been in the presence of the King of Mo and I have seen mighty ones sit at his right hand and die there, from poisoned wine and the silken cord around their neck."

The Emperor frowned, for even so did great men die in Gobi.

"Can you make me live beyond the age of common men?" he finally asked, in his words a great longing for years sufficient to see the ending of Mo.

"I can."

"How?"

THE young man eased himself on the floor and then spoke his answer.

"The life of the working bee is six weeks. It works that long and then it dies. Mo is full of flowers, and the bee is there a sacred insect. For centuries the Royal Bee-keepers have studied the habits and manners and diseases of these bees in the Royal Hives. So they know that the working bees live six weeks. But the queen bee lives for five and sometimes six years, and all those years she is lively and full of vigor and does her work in the world of bees with a healthy constitution.

"Long years ago this difference was seen in the relative age of these bees, and the men who worked with the bees tried to lengthen the lives of the workers so that more honey could be produced. But no one was able to tell why one bee lived six weeks and another five years. Then I was told of the question and how the wise men had failed to solve it. I worked on the matter, and now I know the queen lives long as a result of the food she eats from the time she first crawls from the broken egg shell.

"This feed, the queen-jelly, has in it the element of immortality. I think if she were protected from the younger queens she would never die, but the time comes when she is killed. Perhaps that is best for the hive, but at least she lives a life nearly two and fifty times as long as the existence of the working bee, who eats what he can and when he can, and dies after six weeks of toil."

"Would such food work on a man?" the Emperor of Gobi demanded.

"I think so."

"But how could it be made in quantities to keep a man alive? We have no bees in Gobi, and if we had, it would take large numbers of hives to make a meal for a man."

"When I studied this queen-jelly, I made thereof an analysis and learned its various components, their amounts and the formula of the making. I can take the blood of a bull, the fat of geese, the oil of the turtle and the flesh of certain fish and, by a way that I know of, I can make a food in abundance that will do even as the food of the hive. This food I have tried with creeping things, flying things and little mice, and all of them thrive on it and their life appears to be greatly lengthened.

"This I can make here in Gobi, if I have a place to work and dishes of glass and of gold and all the parts of the formula brought to me. I will make the food. Some of it I will flavor and serve solid, others will seem like wine with the perfume of the vine and the poppy. In every way your thirst and your hunger shall be satisfied, but this food only shall you eat and drink and nothing else."

"You shall have what you need to work

with!" swore the Emperor with a horrible oath. "I shall eat and drink of the food, and so shall these Seven Wise Men, this High Priest, and you. We ten will eat and drink of this food that we may live to see the ending of Mo and the destruction of our enemy. Because of this thing you shall have great honor and shall sit at my right hand where all the people shall reverence you. You shall be the child of my old age, and the ten of us shall one day gather here in this sacred place to hear of the ending of Mo.

"And now, you Seven Wise Men, harken unto me and do as I command, for even though your bellies are filled with this bee food yet can your throats be cut as easily as ever. Give this Physicker all he demands, satisfy his every desire, aid him in every way. Do this first. After that, use all your power for the hastening of the destruction of Mo, for life will be tiresome to me so long as they rule in splendor over the South Seas and deny me the right to levy taxes and take tribute from them."

The meeting came to an end, and all of the Seven went and worshiped their special Gods because a way had been found to prolong their Lord's life and thus permit them to live longer with their sons and their wives.

HERACLES, the wise young physician from Mo, was given a place of his own with special rooms to work in and others to live in. All the wealth and wisdom of Gobi went to aid him in his work. Assigned to help him were certain young men who labored for him as he commanded, but the final preparation of the food was done in secret.

At the ending of the third month the first supply of the food was made and ready to feed the ten who were appointed to eat of it. In every way it was delicate and delicious and dainty in its taste and smell and in the pleasure that it gave to the tongue and the palate. The Emperor was pleased and sent a dozen dancing girls to Heracles as a present, each girl bearing on her body jewels that would have served as a king's ransom. Heracles put the jewels in a safe place and the girls in his harem and promptly forgot about both, for he was engaged in a mighty work.

Thenceforth, the Emperor and the Seven Wise Men and Priest ate all their meals together. After he found that the food was healthful and not in any way poison, the Emperor would at times excuse the young physician from attending at meat with the others, knowing how hard he was working to prepare food for all of them.

III

MEANTIME, the wealth and manpower of Gobi was working as it had never done before. To the north and west lay the Kingdom of Gobi, while to the south and east, for more miles than man could measure, was the beautiful land of Mo. Sixty million men and women of power lived in that land, besides untold slaves and common folk. Between the two lands rolled three hundred miles of ocean.

Neither country could transport armies large enough to conquer the other; hence, each grew in greatness and wealth and hatred of its neighbor. They knew of Atlantis, the third kingdom, but that land gave neither of them concern, for her ways were peaceful and her ambitions more in the conquest of art than of other nations.

Gobi determined to destroy Mo.

Mo brooded over the ending of Gobi.

Each used all the skill and energy and determination it possessed toward the accomplishment of this purpose, and, while each had a partial idea of the plans of the other, they both laughed at their own impending danger because it seemed so fantastic.

The plan that Gobi was working out was simple and yet gigantic in its scope. It was nothing more or less than to blow her enemy to pieces. Tradition and the ancient wise men whispered of large caverns under the land of Mo, huge reservoirs, ten miles under the surface of the land, that were filled with explosive and inflammable gases.

It was believed that the entire land of Mo rested on a thin crust of earth, beneath which were vast caverns and tremendous open spaces, filled only with threats and sullen murmurings from the hidden fires that lived silently so many miles below. Mo was existing on a living Hell. Unconscious of her danger, she laughed and sang and loved, while beneath her a scarlet doom waited with endless patience the signal for its release.

This was the way the land of Mo was built, and on this fact the Seven Wise Men of Gobi formed all their hopes. Their plan was to tunnel under the three hundred miles of ocean, and then from that tunnel dig twenty-six side tunnels, till the land of Mo was burrowed under, even as a mole works in a garden after worms.

At the tunnel ends deep shafts were to be sunk until the heat of the pit made it impossible to work longer, and in these pits powder was to be put, not just pounds or yet tons, but all of each of the twenty-seven vast pits were to be filled with explosive, and the lateral tunnels were also to be filled, and even part of the tunnel under the sea.

And this powder was not the mild kind made of saltpeter, but was of a power so great in its might that even the men of Gobi dreaded it. No greater punishment could be given a criminal than to be sentenced to work in the houses where it was made.

All the dirt from these tunnels had to be carried back to the mouth of the tunnel in the land of Gobi, and there it was piled in long rows. The mountains thus made are still to be seen in parts of Asia.

The finishing of this tunnel and the placing of the powder would take thirty years, but the actual exploding of the powder would be but the time of the taking of a deep breath, though it would be a day before the most distant charges exploded, such was the great distance to the far parts of the land.

Only a part of the destruction would be accomplished by the powder's exploding.

The flames from this would light the large caverns of lethal gases, and these would explode and blast holes in the very pits of bottomless despair, and from these would come the fire of Hell, and what that fire would do to the hated land of Mo could hardly be guessed at.

PART of this plan had reached Mo through its secret spy system, but it was so fantastic, so peculiarly impossible in its greatness that little attention was paid to it. Besides, the inhabitants knew that it would take years for Gobi to dig such tunnels under their land and reach the far corners of their kingdom, and before that time had come they had a very pleasant surprise to hand to Gobi. This would give the wise men of that land plenty to worry about, besides spending an eternity of years digging useless tunnels under the sea.

For there were also wise men in Mo. Perhaps their wise men were possessed of more wisdom than the Seven Wise Men of Gobi, though at the present, when fourteen thousand years have passed since both lands died and lost their wisdom, it is hard to evaluate so delicate a matter as the intelligence of a nation. However, what happened nearly confirmed the boast of Mo that they would win a victory over their enemies before those enemies could come to an end of their tunnel.

Now, it is an interesting fact that the men of Gobi knew of the plans of Mo just as the men of Mo knew of the plans of Gobi. Each had a partial idea of how the enemy was going to attack and each felt that the schemes of the other were impracticable and foolish. The Seven Wise Men made a special report to the Emperor of Gobi that Mo would try to destroy them, but that the method was an impossible one and opposed to all the known laws of nature.

To be brief, Mo intended to have the laws of gravity set aside for a brief period over the entire land of Gobi with the result that the land, no longer held down by gravity or the weight of the atmosphere, would leap into the air, freezing the entire kingdom miles above the ocean in an atmosphere of bitter cold where pleasure would cease and men would be so occupied with fighting the winter that no time or energy would remain for the pursuit of pleasure or the softer recreations of life.

The People of Gobi would then have neither time nor energy for building tunnels to destroy Mo. If they remained in their own elevated land they would have to fight the cold; if they left it they would have to fight the barbarians. Meantime, the gentlefolk of Mo would continue to live in pleasure and a warm place upder the tropical sun.

Thus, each country lived in what proved to be a fool's Paradise.

However, the Emperor of Mo had built in the far East a special retreat and a place of refuge. There he and his rich men and their wives went for six months every year when the summer sun was the warmest in Mo. Many centuries before, it had been foretold that when Mo was destroyed, it would be during the period of intense heat. Thus, for several decades now the chosen few protected themselves against such a fate, even though they laughingly told each other that it was impossible.

The plans of the wise men of Mo were not as fantastic as might be imagined. Even today, in our dense ignorance, there are East Indians who can suspend themselves in the air in absolute defiance of the laws of gravitation. If a man can do this now in our dark ages, why should not a field or a forest be made to do the same at that time when men knew many things of which we are now ignorant?

Heracles had come to Gobi by no accident. His capture was simply a part of the plans of the conspirators of Mo. Had he not been captured on shipboard, he would have come to Gobi, anyway. His ability to make the life-prolonging bee jelly was just a happy incident, but, at the same time, such was the wisdom of this young man that had almost anything else been asked of him he would have been able to give a satisfactory answer.

He had come to Gobi to lift that unhappy country three miles or more into the air; his making of the bee food simply made it easier for him to carry out his plans. Now, as the trusted friend of the Emperor, as the man who was making his royal food, he had full access to every part of the Kingdom of Gobi.

HOW he obtained his results cannot even be guessed at. If any wise man of today duplicated his experiment, there would be no similar result. So, it must be true that this man of Mo knew something the scientists of today do not know. All that Heracles did was to set aside a room into which no one came but himself.

In that room he built, with his own hands, a table on four squat legs, the top of the table near the floor. The legs were telescoped so that when air was released into them from a pressure tank the table slowly rose into the air till it came near the ceiling of the high room.

On the top of this table Heracles built, out of sand and stone and little painted pieces of wood, a scaled relief map of the Empire of Gobi. When the time came he intended to raise the table, and even as the table rose in the air, so would the entire land of his enemies rise in proportion.

The plan was perfect, and yet at the very end a little thing destroyed the perfect consummation of it, allowing matters to end as they did.

To select this room, secretly build the table and the tank and the apparatus for compressing the air and to make a perfect duplicate of the Kingdom of Gobi on the top of the table, took time. Even in his moments of greatest fancied security Heracles could not relax his caution one moment. Every piece of wood and metal had to be carried into the room under his flowing robes at the dead of night. At times, a year passed without his being able even to enter the room, for often the Emperor insisted on trips of inspection to the far corners of the Kingdom. On these trips he was careful to see that the

Seven Wise Men and the Priest and the Physician accompanied him.

Meantime, the years passed. The special food, the nourishment of queen bees that was the only nutriment of the Emperor and the Wise Men, was working admirably in every way. The Emperor was not only retaining his original age, he seemed to be growing younger. It was rumored that the High Priest, who had been nearly ninety at the beginning of the experiment, had become a father through the aid of one of the ladies of the Temple. There was no doubt about the rejuvenating value of the food.

Thirty years passed.

These years had not been idle. Thousands of men worked to destroy Mo, while only one man patiently worked to destroy Gobi. Meantime, the Emperor of Mo spent more and more time in his special retreat under the mountains of Arizona.

In a Royal trireme he would sail east till he came to the mouth of a large river, the one that is now called the Colorado. Up this he would sail to a harbor, from which place the royal elephants would carry him and his escorts to the mouth of a tunnel. There, he changed to litters carried on the shoulders of slaves, and for twenty-seven miles under the massive mountains, the slaves would walk on a pavement of red sandstone through a tunnel illumined by the torches of marble slaves who patiently stood in almost endless rows. The light from their torches never varied, and was cold. Since then, the secret of cold light has never been re-discovered.

At the end of the twenty-seven miles there came an end to the tunnel, and there in a natural crater was built the splendid royal city. It was a small place, there being room at most for a hundred of the nobility and their servants. But in that little city was the wealth of the land of Mo. For seven hundred years each Emperor had carried there his finest treasures and left them there. Such was the place in which the great men of Mo waited for the prophecy to come true. From there, after six months, they returned to Mo, glad that another year of safety had passed over them.

IV

YEARLY, and half yearly, Heracles sent messages to the King's Councilors at the capital of Mo, reporting his own progress and warning of the dangers that threatened Mo. But to these warnings little attention was given, while the certainty of the destruction of Gobi was fully believed and occasioned much joy.

Finally, at a meeting of the Wise Men of Gobi and the Emperor, the time for finishing of the tunnels and the exploding of the powder was determined, and it was announced that in one year this would take place. This announcement filled Heracles with boundless determination to finish his work, thus preventing destruction of Mo by first hoisting Gobi into an eternity of cold and snow. Of the work that he was doing little now remained unfinished. One or two more nights would see an ending of the preparation, and then Gobi would be destroyed.

But not at once.

Heracles was not content with simple destruction. The years of study and the sacrifice of a lifetime among strangers had filled him with the determination for a deeper and more terrible venegance than simply the freezing of his enemies. For thirty years he had plotted this vengeance; for all those years he had studied and planned and experimented, and now he was prepared to begin a deed that would strike terror to all the people. In after years, when it became known, it would place the name of Heracles, the Physician of Mo, among the names of the Great of the whole Earth.

During these thirty years he had continuously fed the Emperor and his Seven Wise Men and the High Priest. Years of wonderful health, boundless vitality and splendid vigor gave these men the greatest confidence in the honesty and integrity of the man who fed them. Now Heracles, with their fate in his hands, prepared for them a future so different from what they had expected that not even their wildest dreams could have anticipated it.

In preparation for this fate he held a long secret converse with the Emperor, warning him of the danger of the explosions that they were going to make. Once the bowels of the earth were teased till they vomited fire, it was hard to tell where the trouble would end. Would it not be best to prepare the Hall of the Dragons with beds and food and all necessary luxuries, and retire there with his Wise Men before the electric spark was fired? Would it not be wise to have the wires run into the Hall of the Dragon so that the Emperor himself could have the joy of personally pressing the golden button thus, all by himself, have the satisfaction of blowing the Hell of the Bottomless Pits into the faces of his enemies of Mo?

The Emperor was delighted with the plan. He agreed to all that was suggested. He even went further and arranged for a month of entertainment in the Hall of the Dragon, consisting of feasting, amusements, and the delightful killing of slaves in strange and unusual ways. He gave orders that for all that month he and his Seven Wise Men and the Priest and a few of the more select Nobles should lie on golden couches, on pads of goose feathers covered with fine velvets and silks. There they would drink the wine and eat the bee-food that their friend, Heracles, prepared for them. When the time came the golden button would be pressed and Mo would be destroyed. When it was safe they would go to the seashore and sail over the land of their enemies to see for themselves the deadly fate that their energy and hatred had prepared for them.

Now all was to the liking of Heracles. A month of drunkenness during which he would work out his final plans. Then, on the day before the pressing of the button, Gobi would slowly move into the air—and what cared Heracles how long the Em-

peror of Gobi and his advisers lived, so long as they lived the life that he prepared for them?

THUS, at the beginning of the debauch, Heracles changed the food. It tasted and had the fragrance of the former food and wine, and it still contained large amounts of the bee-jelly, but in addition there was opium to lull their senses and allay their suspicion, hyoscine to make their dreams more pleasant and, finally, a secret compound made from the internal glands of actual men and women, collected carefully during all these years from the bodies of slaves and criminals condemned to death.

This medicine, given in proper doses, melted the bones of those who took it, so that finally they became boneless bags of skin and fat, within which bags they lived and thought but could not move, simply lying where they were placed till someone placed them in a different shape.

Men in their normal minds would know of the changes taking place in their bones. Men, walking or taking exercise, would have fractures and strange changes in their shape, due to the gradual weakening and bending of their long bones. But men who lay in a long drunk for a month, dull with opium and pleasured with drug dreams, would gradually weaken and become helpless without knowing what was happening to them.

This was the final revenge of Heracles, to turn these men into boneless horrors, men without skeletons, jelly fishes of humanity, helpless in their despairing terror —and they would not die! That was the beauty of it—that they would live on forever, like the queen bee. In their system was food sufficiently concentrated and powerful to keep them alive a thousand years. Yet, what would such a life mean to them?

Heracles, in his joy, visioned these helpless men in the Hall of the Dragons, levitated thousands of feet into the air. He saw them living in a palace, cold and cheerless, with the damp of doom at noonday turned into a freezing, living death of cold as soon as the weakened sun dropped behind the Western mountains. There they would live, perhaps worshipped and cared for as Gods by a few shivering mountaineers, perhaps neglected and forgotten, but no matter what happened, they would never die. That was the beauty of it—the fact that they would keep on living.

He was going to send them up, up, up in the air, so high that there would be no wolves to tear their boneless bodies and so cold that no flies would larvate in their helpless nostrils. Perhaps for a year or so he would visit them and talk over matters with them. He might even induce the Emperor of Mo to come on an excursion and see for himself the fate that had come to those who had plotted the destruction of Mo.

The entertainment began, and the Emperor of Gobi was happy in that he had such a wise physician, such a long life ahead of him, such a fine ending to Mo, such lovely women and a skillful High Executioner who could think of so many new and novel ways of killing men slowly. They laughed and loved and drank and stupidly thrilled over the slaves who died in front of them for their entertainment, not once realizing that their bones were slowly being dissolved within them.

Across the Hall of the Dragons, Heracles had his seat of honor. He only of all those in the hall could come and go, for the Emperor had given command that of all who came into the hall at the onset of the month none should leave it till the golden button was pressed, none, that is, except the dead slaves and those who killed them. And Heracles sat there day after day, seeing his enemies weaken from the disease, now known as Osteomalacia. But the queens and those servants who were shapely enough to comfort the Emperor by serving as pillows for him and his Wise Men, and the dancing girls were spared the disease. They simply lived on in a phantasmagoria, thinking that the growing incapacity of the Emperor and the other great men was simply the raction born of surfeit and drunkenness.

ON the twenty-eighth day, when Heracles knew that all of his plans were ready, he lessened the dose of the opium and thus allowed the drugged men to come alertly to their senses. Preparing food and wine in abundance, he left the Hall of the Dragons. Cautioning the guards to let no one in or out, he retired to his palace, there to finish the destruction of the hated country.

When he had shut, barred and doublelocked the room in his castle wherein stood the table with the map of Gobi on it, he had everything in readiness for the debacle. The tank was full of compressed air. From it tubes ran to the hollow of each the four telescopic legs. The joints of these legs had been carefully oiled with grease obtained by boiling the fat of bodies of slaves. On the table was the finished map, perfect in every detail. A turn of the screw would loosen the compressed air, the pressure of which would raise the map thirty feet into the air. As the map would rise, so would all of Gobi.

The secret of such scientific magic is now lost to mankind, but this much we know; the pressure of the air in each of these little tubes was, by his device, multiplied billion-fold by a force under the surface of Gobi. Aided by powerful volcanic gases, when the table was lifted, the force of the gases under Gobi, proportionately great, lifted the country.

Heracles now turned on the screw, and there was a hiss of air. Nothing happened.

For a very little and unexpected something had taken place during the twenty-eight days the chamber had been tenantless. A hungry mouse had wandered into the room, and for some reason had taken a fancy to the taste of the fiber tubes through which the air passed. The rodent had eaten through the tubes in many places, little holes hardly to be seen but large enough to permit the leakage of air.

Heracles, for all his wisdom, had not been able to foresee this mouse. Now, with but two days at his command, the entire plan was ruined unless he could repair the tubes. It was useless to try and make new ones. There was nothing else to do except work. This he did, tirelessly and persistently, repairing hole after hole. But even with all his ability, the main tube remained weak and not fully worthy of trust. When the full pressure of air was turned into it, it still leaked so that it was insufficient to raise the table.

Heracles spent more precious hours refilling the tank with compressed air, and then he did the only thing he could do. He took part of the map off the table to lighten the load. Thus all of the map representing what is now Southern China, Burmah and the lower part of India was removed, and shared no part in the cataclysm that befell the rest of Gobi.

Finally all was ready. Yet, in this delay many valuable hours had been wasted, and Heracles stood there swaying from fatigue and nervous tire and worry, beneath his hand the screw that, turning, would destroy Gobi.

Suddenly he heard a dull roar and then another and another, like a distant thunder storm, and he sickened, for he knew that he had waited too long.

There being nothing to do, he turned the screw and sent the full force of air into the legs of the table. It worked, and up went the map of Gobi into the air. But one leg was weaker than the rest. The table rose unevenly, and there was some sliding and slithering of the earth forming the map.

Heracles felt himself moving slowly as the palace he was in also went up, because all of the land under it was in upward motion. It was a slow movement and hard to realize in this central part of Gobi, with all of the land for thousands of square miles around going upward in perfect harmony. There was no way in this part of the country to detect the extent of the movement save by the gradual increase in the coldness of the air.

HERACLES knew that his experiment had been a success.

Yet, from far away, there came the rolling thunder. With a sickening sense of failure, he knew that he had been a little late and that already Mo was sinking under the tormented waves of the Great Ocean.

Sighing, he put on heavy furs that he had prepared against this hour, and walked slowly through the deserted streets of the great city. Here and there a small house had fallen, but all of the royal palaces remained as they had been. For the most part the people, accustomed to a semi-tropical climate, were seeking warmth in their houses. Thus, the streets were deserted.

On the great physician went, past the Royal Palace and on to the Hall of the Dragons. There he found the guards on duty, but almost numb from the cold. With pity in his heart he bade them seek warmth if they could find it. Then he went into the inner Hall of the Dragons where he knew that, helpless, lay the Emperor of Gobi with his Seven Wise Men and his High Priest. Perhaps with them would be a few of the queens, but of this he was in doubt.

While Heracles had been working in almost a frenzy to repair the air tube, the Emperor and his advisers had slowly regained their normal senses. Almost dazed, it was hard for them to realize what had happened to them, but one thing they knew, and that was the useless state of their bodies. A strange sense of helplessness overcame them, and all efforts to move but resulted in a peculiar writhing and a sad changing in their shape with no progression.

The Emperor was no fool. While unable to know what had really happened to him, he had no difficulty in determining who was at the bottom of it. Only one man in all Gobi could work such a wonder as the dissolving of a man's bones in his body! He looked and saw that he was being supported on cushions held by his favorite wife.

Not daring to speak, he made signs with his eyes that he should be lifted up a little. She raised him slowly, for the sudden bending of what had been his backbone caused fearful pains to shoot through him nearly killing him with the dreadful agony.

The woman wiped the sweat from his face, and he looked around him. There on the divans he saw the men who had been his counselors. They lay in odd shapes, like leather bags full of thin sausage, and on the faces of all of them was a hell of despair. Knowing not what had come over them, they knew that they could not move and were growing cold, and realized that they could not die.

One by one, the women took the gold and the silver and the precious gems and fled from the accursed place. Only one remained. She held the head of the Emperor and tried to ease him of his pain, for she was his favorite wife and was going to bear him a son.

The Emperor tried to remember what it was all about and how he had come to this depth of trouble. He recalled his bitter hate and knew that Mo still remained undestroyed. He breathed harshly, and his woman put her pink shell near his mouth. With a great effort he told her to press the golden button. This she did.

Thus Mo was destroyed by the dainty fingers of a slave woman who had no name and was simply there and faithful to the Emperor.

As the room grew colder, the women gathered the rugs and silken sheets and wrapped each jelly fish of a man up as warmly as she could, but the warmest things she put around the Emperor. There the nine lay, boneless and unable to die, and the breath from their nostrils congealed like steam in the frosty air.

Thus, Heracles found them.

He sat down by the Emperor and told the story of what he had done and how he had planned that his enemies should

live on for centuries, filled with the long life of the bee-jelly and boneless, because of the gland-juice that he had given them. The Emperor heard it all, soundless and motionless, but in his eyes was a look of hatred that only a great man can devise, and in his heart was a deep content, for he knew from the rolling thunder that Mo was destroyed.

MO was being blown to pieces. The damage done by thousands of tons of powder was only a small part of the harm done to that fair land. The buried gases, exploding, tore the deep rocks into a million fragments, and all over Mo volcanoes burst into activity. Tidal waves overflowed the land, lava buried it. Sixty million people were drowned, burned or suffocated with the poisonous fumes.

A continent was destroyed, leaving scattered islands as small fragments—Borneo on one side and the Easter Islands on the other. Australia to the south was formed, arid, cheerless, a fit home for Bushmen. Some of the citizens of Mo survived on the mountain peaks, hurled upward, as in the Hawaiian group, but their culture, temples, wealth and even their tradition were hopelessly lost.

The Emperor of Mo, with his favorite wives and nobles, was feasting in the small city of refuge. The shock of the cataclysm reached them even in that far, rock-bound enclosure. They feasted on, each man and woman pretending to his neighbors at the banquet table that the sound was thunder.

The banquet passed on through the night, and the next day a breathless messenger arrived with the news that could only be given to the Emperor. This news was whispered in the royal ear as the great man sat at the head of the table. He, shivering, commanded a certain wine to be served and ordered in all seriousness that a health be drunk to their beloved land of Mo. All of the great men and their lovely women drank of this wine and then sat down and died. Their servants fled in terror to press on into the desert where they died in various ways.

FOURTEEN thousand years later three prospectors, typical desert rats of Arizona, prospected for gold near the Colorado River. One day, while working in a twenty-nine foot shaft, one of them drove his pick through the roof of what seemed to be an abandoned mine shaft. It was paved with square, beveled stones fastened together with cement. These stones had the appearance of great age.

Descending into this shaft with torches, they followed it for twenty miles and came to a buried city. There they found many old buildings, one of which contained a circular chamber. It was a large table of marble, around which sat the dead bodies of seventy-two persons, all over six feet tall, with blue eyes, and white skin, and the flesh was white and firm, being preserved in some wonderful manner. On these bodies was jewelry, but most of the clothing had fallen into dust.

In another large room were the dead bodies of over two hundred women who looked as though they had been lovely in their day.

Throughout the city there were peculiar trap doors and all kinds of interesting levers and mechanisms, the use of which was hard to determine.

Taking a lot of the jewelry with them, they sought civilization to secure help in the exploration of the city. When they returned they found a freshet of the Colorado had covered the opening of the tunnel with sand, and they were unable to re-locate it.

THUS died the great land of Mo.

The fair country of Atlantis had no enemies. It lived only for pleasure and art. From Ireland to the shores of America it lay in the sunshine. Then one day a great continent across the globe was destroyed. A terrific shifting of balance of weight took place. Large tidal waves rolled from one sea to the other and suddenly the continent of Atlantis was swallowed up by the water of the Atlantic Ocean. Thus, a kindly, lovable people paid the price of the hatred between two nations that they had never harmed. So perished the second of these great lands.

Where Gobi once ruled supreme, now rule the Himalayas. These mountains, the greatest in the world, run nineteen hundred miles from east to west, and an average of ninety miles from north to south. They cover a total of one hundred and sixty thousand square miles. Of these mountains, the greatest peak, Mount Everest, reaches upward to the sky twenty-nine thousand one hundred and forty feet above sea level. Immense sections of these mountains are inaccessible to modern man.

Hidden in the tops of these mountains, unknown to man save by tradition, lies the ancient capitol of the lost Empire of Gobi. Half-frozen Tartars, insect-ridden Lamas, barbarians of every description remain as the sole descendants of what was once a great people. Even the memory of their former greatness has been lost in the changing struggles of fourteen thousand years. If they are asked how old these mountains are, they will reply that they have always been there. How could they know that once all this land was lowland, forest land, a pleasant country for rich folk to live in? How could they know of the physician from Mo and his magical table and map thereon?

Yet, amid those mountains, lies the ancient city and the Hall of Dragons. There, on their silken cushions and their beds of goosefeathers, lie the boneless Emperor, the boneless High Priest and the boneless Seven Wise Men. Though their bodies are chilled with the frost of centuries, yet, would there come a pleasant day of springtime with blossoming almond trees and a warm, gentle shower, those frozen hearts would once again send pulsing life through those boneless sacks, for full of the jelly-food of the queen bee they can never die, at least, not for a long, long time.

On the floor in front of the Emperor lies the body of Heracles, dead of a dagger, thrust by the nervous hand of the woman beloved by the Emperor. The body of the physician, frozen, decays not.

Neither does the body of the beloved woman.

And, frozen in her body, lies the unborn Prince of Gobi, last of a royal line that dared all for their hatred of a bitter enemy.

Thus perished Gobi.

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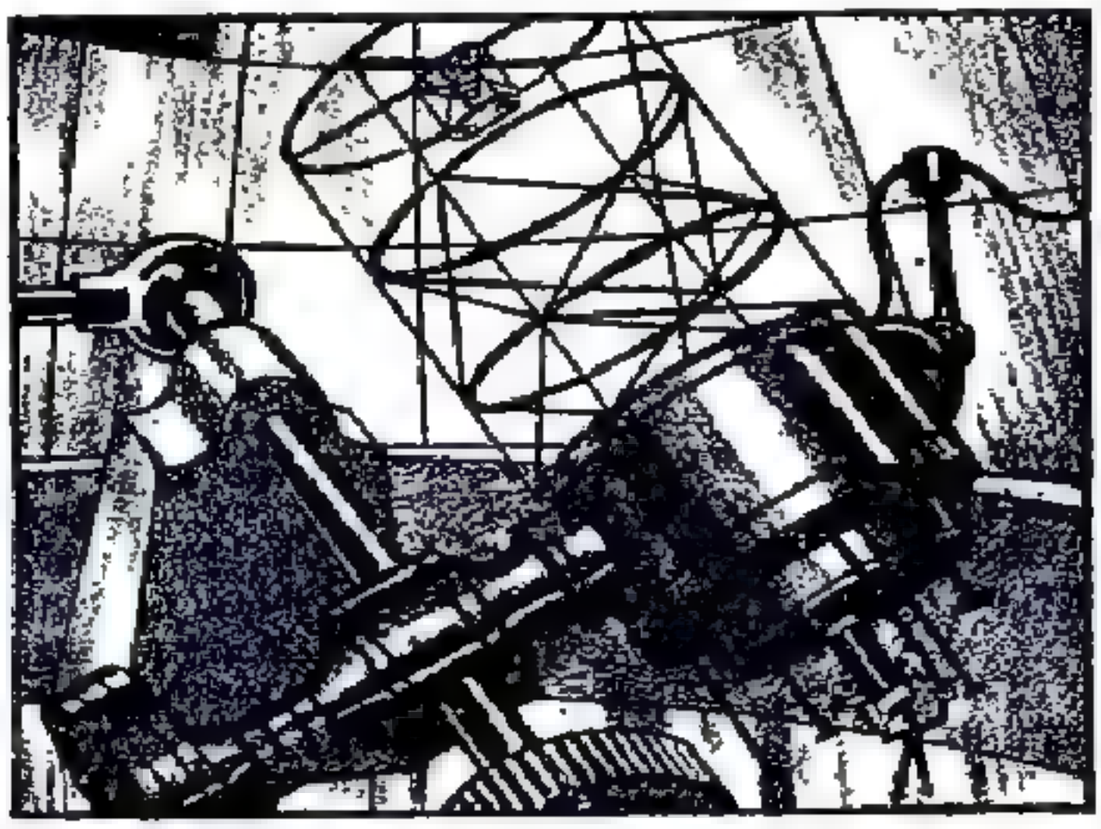

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TRAIL'S END

By JOHN BROOME

Author of "Vagabonds of the Void," "Land of the Wooden Men," etc.

Venusian Skill Gives John Kellie a New Face and Freedom—but Surgery Can't Change a Man's Heart When a Space-Storm Strikes!

"PLEASE be qwi-et. It will own-lie be a mi-nut mawr." The soft-voiced, broken English of the Venusian came muffled through the thick bandage that surrounded John Kellie's head and face. He felt the marvelously supple fingers of the surgeon unwrapping the gauze with deft, circular movements. A minute more. . . .

Kellie sat rigid in the heavy medical chair. He had been awaiting this moment for three never-ending weeks, ever since Dr. Awi, the Venusian, had undertaken the operation.

"There, my dir zorr."

John Kellie blinked as the last strip came off and the bright artificial light of the office assailed his eyes. Dr. Awi, smiling like a little yellow Buddha, stood before him, extending a hand-mirror. Kellie's hand shook as he took the glass. He was almost afraid to look. What if the tales of Venusian plastic surgery had been so much hooey?

"Good Lord!" he gasped.

He could hardly credit his eyes. The face in the glass was utterly unrecognizable. The stubby nose and cleft chin, the high cheek-bones and straight hair—it was the face of a stranger. Kellie grunted with involuntary embarrassment. It was staring rudely at someone else. Even his eyes had been changed from pale-

The face in the glass was utterly unrecognizable

blue to jet-black by the Venusian's wizardry.

"You ar-re za-tizzfied, zorr?"

"Swell, Doc," Kellie muttered huskily. "Swell."

He looked at his hands, at the fresh fingertips and the unmarked palms. He had been a pilot and it had been necessary to remove the telltale callouses from his palms. Everything had been done perfectly. Now it was up to him.

He rose and drew a deep breath into his big chest. From now on John Kellie was dead and gone. There existed only Barron Kirk, with a new passport in his pocket—a passport to a new life! He turned and saw that Dr. Awi was regarding him with a faint smile on his bland face.

"You think I'm a fugitive, Awi," John Kellie said slowly. "You've thought so all along. Why did you operate?"

The Venusian shrugged. "It izz not my con-zern what you may be."

"I am a fugitive, but for a crime I never committed. That's the truth, Awi."

"That is you're-re conzern alone, zorr."

KELLIE nodded. These Venusians were certainly wonderful people, doing their jobs without asking a lot of questions. Back on Terra or Mars, he would have had to fill out a hundred forms to get this operation. And by that time there would have been Virhac—

As John Kellie pulled on his new suit of clothes, he thought grimly of the man who for five years had driven him out of every city and across every planet in the System. Ever since he made his escape from William Virhac aboard the convict ship bound for Lune II five years ago, the Patrol officer had never been off his trail.

Kellie knew why Virhac hunted him with such tenacity. His escape was the only serious blot on the Service man's record. And to a man of Virhac's stamp, only his own death or his prey's could serve as an excuse for not erasing that blot.

Kellie had slept without peace, eaten food without surcease from hunger. For five years he had known only the desperation of the convicted fugitive. The memory made his big jaw harden. Let the famous Patrol Hawk bag him now—if he could recognize him!

"Here, Doc, and thanks."

He handed Awi most of the notes in the crisp wallet. It was the agreed price and cheap at that. It left him little, but that didn't matter. He ought to be able to land a job now, maybe even as a pilot. He'd been a good pilot once, good enough to handle the *New Orion* on her maiden voyage out of Los Angeles five years ago. It had been on the *Orion's* home trek. . . .

Kellie shook off the old memories of the accident that had made him a hunted man. He had learned that did nothing but drive him crazy to think of it. He buttoned his coat rapidly and turned to Awi.

"Good-by, zorr." The Venusian bowed toward the door. "Bez-zt of luck."

John Kellie emerged from the low Venusian dwelling into notorious Judas St. in Venus City. The narrow alley that crawled crookedly through the System's largest demi-world was now almost empty. In the gathering dusk there were still a few people abroad—*lethe* runners, penny murderers and fugitives—as he himself had been up to now.

He merged with the crowd that walked silently, heads low. By force of habit Kellie tucked his chin into his chest and buried his face in the collar of his topcoat. But at once he raised it. There wasn't any need of his hiding now, he told himself angrily. Not even his mother, if she were alive, would have known him.

He walked slowly, for he had been flat on his back for three weeks and hadn't yet got his sea-legs. At the end of Judas St. a broad avenue crossed and led to the space terminal. There the *Empress of Cairo*, with a hull cargo for New York and some incidental passengers, lay in her steel harness. The *Empress* was due out in an hour and John Kellie had in his pocket a top-deck ticket under his new name. He walked more buoyantly as he thought of New York. It had

been many years.

"I beg your pardon. Have you a match?"

Kellie halted and turned impatiently to the slim, dapper little man who had addressed him. He flicked a light and stared by its glow into the sallow, sharp-featured face of William Virhac.

THE sight of his enemy came as a perceptible blow to Kellie, even though he had known that the Service would trail him to Venus City. He felt no fear, only hatred and a sort of tingling curiosity. Could Virhac pierce Dr. Awi's creation?

John Kellie had the creepy sensation that the quick, beady eyes which scanned his face, while Virhac drew on the light between his cupped hands, were more than ordinarily curious. There seemed to be a strange intensity in the Service man's deliberate gaze.

"Passport?"

Virhac showed his Patrol badge at the same time as he clipped out the word.

"Sure," Kellie said.

The voice Awi had given to him still sounded strange to the big Earthman. He pulled out the flat book and handed it over. Virhac opened it.

"Barron Kirk," the little man read rapidly. "Occupation stevedore. Ten years in good standing." He glanced up. "That you?"

"Of course."

Virhac looked back at the passport. A sudden rage almost overcame Kellie as he watched. He could murder Virhac with a single blow of his fist and on Judas St. there was a good chance that he could escape unscathed. The urge to wipe out the human machine before him—the machine that had tracked him as relentlessly as if he were an animal—surged up in John Kellie like a blazing fire. Yet he stayed his hand.

He was no criminal, but killing Virhac would make him one. In a way it would be playing into dark-skinned devil's hand. Kellie smiled grimly to himself and stood quiet. Abruptly Virhac handed the book back.

"Judas Street's no place for an Earthman," he said curtly. "I'd advise you to be on your way."

With that the Service man passed on.

Happiness flowed through John Kellie's veins like strong liquor as he continued toward the space terminal. It must have been his imagination that had seen recognition in the sleuth's gaze, he told himself. Virhac hadn't known him, couldn't possibly have known him. From now on John Kellie —or rather Barron Kirk—was free to go and come as he pleased. And by Antares' twenty-six moons, he pleased right now to go to Terra just as fast as the leaky old *Empress* could carry him there!

Sue had said she would be waiting for him no matter how long it took. Sue wasn't the kind to break her word. An observer, watching the big Earthman leg it to the Terminal, would scarcely credit the report that John Kellie had spent the last three weeks under a surgeon's knife.

THE *Empress of Cairo* had once been the pride of the Great Starry Fleet. Now, sporting her tenth or eleventh coat of cheap, gilt paint, plus plenty of goo amidships to grease her squeaky struts, she was lugging along on her twentieth hour out of Venus City when John Kellie emerged from his compartment. The ship was rolling somewhat on her beam. Kellie had to use the corridor bulkhead to balance himself as he made his way toward the main salon.

He felt as refreshed as a man will who has slept nearly the entire clock around. The great salon was hardly a quarter-full when he got there. It was an off season for Venusian touring.

Kellie quickly scanned the faces of those in the spacious room. There were three or four business men with their families, the usual sprinkling of salesmen and one or two schoolma'ms. And in a far corner, near a port, a man sat reading.

John Kellie's heart lurched queerly as he caught sight of the thin-lipped, sallow face behind the newspaper.

Virhac!

It needed all Kellie's strength to prevent a cry of surprise and dismay

from escaping his lips. But he gripped himself and deliberately sat down next to a group in full view of the Service man. After all, Virhac's presence on the *Empress* might be just a coincidence. To hide now would be senseless.

"Did you hear that one of the pilots was taken sick this morning?" A fat, red-faced man who looked like a banker had turned and addressed Kellie. "That means there's only the man on duty now. I think it's an unholy scandal the way these ships are understaffed. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to report this to the Investigation Board as soon as we land!"

The red-faced man puffed pompously. He was the kind that thought nothing of making trouble for the crew, but he was really frightened now. Kellie could see that. His fear had infected the others, including his own family. One of his children, a little, fair-haired boy, was pulling at his knee and wailing:

"Daddy, what's the matter? What is it, Daddy?"

"I don't think there's anything to worry about." Kellie tried to be reassuring. "One man can pilot a ship for twenty-four hours, if necessary. Why, I—"

He had been about to mention that he himself had held the *Orion's* controls for a stretch of fifty-one hours, but he caught himself. He was not John Kellie any more. He must train himself to remember that. He was Barron Kirk, stevedore. A single slip might render Awi's elaborate work worse than useless.

"I'm certain there's nothing to worry about, mister," he finished lamely.

The banker looked down the length of his nose at Kellie, as if questioning Kellie's right to have opinions on anything.

"Well, I think there is something to worry about," he snapped. "I pay taxes. Where in blazes does our money go, if it doesn't provide for extra pilots to insure our safety?"

Kellie shrugged and moved only his eyes toward the salon's far corner. He saw that Virhac had lowered his paper now and was regarding him steadily. When their eyes met, the Service man acknowledged their previous meeting with a short, quick nod and Kellie replied in kind. But for a long moment Virhac did not relinquish the gaze. Again John Kellie felt the queer, stabbing certainty that Virhac knew. He struggled hard with the overpowering sensation before throwing it off.

"Nerves!" he berated himself. "He can't know me. I'm still jittery from all that neo-coc old Awi shot into my spinal column."

WHEN dinner was served, Kellie sat next to the red-faced banker at the long dining salon table. The banker was more agitated than ever. The *Empress* had run into a little stormy ether. Every time the ship lurched slightly, Kellie thought the fat man would collapse. He was worse than any woman, yet there was always at least one of his type aboard every ship.

Kellie raised his eyes and found that Virhac was staring at him across the long table. He raged inwardly. What did Virhac expect to do—X-ray Barron Kirk with his eyes and discover John Kellie underneath?

Kellie grinned deliberately into Virhac's face. Let the black devil think what he wanted. No one could prove that John Kellie existed, so long as Barron Kirk denied it. That was the thing to remember.

The ether got worse as the meal progressed and the diners had to use the table slots to keep their plates from shooting around. By this time the two children of the red-faced banker were crying loudly and their nurse had to take them to their compartment.

Kellie frowned as he saw them go. If necessary, men and women could always escape in the emergency boats. Their grown bodies could withstand the pressure of the little craft even for twenty-four hours, but it would be torture for the little ones. Kellie had seen children who had been too long in a dory rocket. It wasn't a pleasant memory.

This was a real ion-storm, all right.

Kellie could feel the light-weight beryl-steel frame of the *Empress* shiver in time with the concentrated energy waves striking her hull broadside. The pilot was doing his best to outride the storm, he knew. All stern and fin rockets were working wide throttle.

"The blasted fool!" Kellie thought. "Why doesn't he change his course and head into the storm? It's the quickest way to lose it."

Then he remembered with sudden apprehension that the pilot had been alone for the last fifteen hours. "He must be groggy as blazes by now."

It needed a thoroughly wide-awake man at the controls in a storm like this.

Everybody had stopped making any pretense of eating and a current of suppressed anxiety filled the room. Only Virhac continued methodically and calmly with his meal. Didn't the Service man realize the danger? If so, he gave no sign. Kellie looked at the cold, sallow face of his enemy with something akin to admiration. Virhac might be nothing but a mechanical bloodhound, as rumor described him, but he was certainly no weak sister.

Suddenly, as if everybody had been awaiting it, the old *Empress* came through with a crazy lurch that threw Kellie off his chair and almost sprawled him full-length on the carpet. When he jumped up, the ship was still rocking jerkily and there was bedlam in the salon. Everyone was crawling to his feet and yelling at the same time.

"What happened?" the two-school-ma'ams were screaming.

"The emergency boats!" the red-faced banker was shouting hoarsely. "Get us to the emergency boats at once!"

A WHITE-JACKETED steward slipped into the salon from the forward gangway. Kellie saw Virhac stop him and flash his badge. The steward said something to the Service man that Kellie couldn't catch through the noise. Virhac nodded and mounted a chair.

"Quiet, please!" His unhurried tone cut through the hysterical din. "The steward has something to tell us."

All eyes in the salon turned in hope toward the white-jacketed figure whose brow was creased worriedly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the steward began quickly, "we must all keep our heads. I have just come from the control room. The pilot was injured slightly by the last shock and—

"Please!" he cried through the sudden wave of moans. "There must be order. The pilot will keep his place until the ship is empty. Everybody must go at once to the boat assigned to his compartment. A crew member at each station will see that the boats are launched according to number."

John Kellie shook his head, frowning.

"But we're too far out," he protested. "The children won't have a chance."

The steward's distressed gaze turned toward the big passenger. It was clear to Kellie that the white-jacket knew too well the fate awaiting the children aboard.

"Can't be helped, sir," the steward replied thickly. "We'd all go in a few minutes. The pilot can't last longer than that."

He turned away. Virhac, standing by, caught the white-jacket by the arm.

"But, steward," the service man said, "if there were a licensed pilot on board, he could relieve the man on duty, couldn't he?"

His words were addressed to the steward, but his eyes were looking straight at John Kellie.

"He knows," Kellie thought.

This time there was no doubt in his mind. The steward nodded in response to Virhac's question, but shrugged helplessly, indicating that he expected no such piece of luck.

"If there were a pilot aboard," Virhac repeated.

The cold contempt in his voice as he looked at John Kellie was like the bite of an icy wind.

"A trap," Kellie thought. "The devil is laying a trap for me."

Aloud he grunted in a low voice: "No chance of that, I guess."

The steward nodded hopelessly.

"Then it's the emergency boats for everyone. It had better be quick."

Kellie picked his way slowly along the heaving salon floor to the other side of the room. From there he watched with a strange numbness as the preparations were made to abandon ship. The crew, moving with great rapidity, was assembling the necessary provisions at each boat station. The steward was doing his best to keep the panicky passengers in order.

THE red-faced banker lurched into the salon, loaded down by three heavy grips. It would have to be left, of course, but he didn't know that. Nor, apparently, did he know what the twelve-hour trip to the nearest port in a dory rocket would do to his kids. Maybe he didn't care about anything, so long as he himself got away.

The children came out next, tears streaming down their frightened faces. Kellie thought that already he could see the frail, little bodies mangled and torn, with blood spurting from their mouths, crushed by the fierce pressure in the small boats. A child under six might survive an hour or two in a dory, but never half a day. They were rushing out to their death.

John Kellie felt his new palms rubbing together restlessly, tormentedly. He knew that from somewhere in the room Virhac was still watching him, but he didn't want to meet the little man's gaze now. He kept his head low, staring straight out before him.

"Don't be a fool now," a voice within him whispered. "Not now, after five years, when you're safe. Sue and a new life lie ahead of you once you get into a dory. To blazes with a couple of brats! Think of yourself. You've gone through plenty. Barron Kirk is a dock-walloper, no pilot."

"But John Kellie is," another voice came from deep inside him. "Sue wouldn't want you if she knew the price of your freedom. Sue had faith in John Kellie. She believed in him and still does. Barron Kirk won't be able to tell her that he let a dozen children go to a pressure-death. It will be a guilty secret he'll have to carry to his grave alone."

John Kellie blinked and something snapped inside him. He hardly knew he had crossed the salon until the steward stood before him. He grabbed the man by the shoulder.

"Take me for'ard!"

"What—" the white-jacket began uncomprehendingly.

"Don't ask questions," Kellie snapped. "Take me to the control room."

Something in his voice caused the steward to drop the water jugs in his hands as if they were white-hot. He led the big passenger along the gangway into the pilot's cabin. Kellie tapped the green-uniformed back of the man at the controls.

"Okay bud, move over. I'll take her from here."

The pilot looked over his shoulder, smiled weakly and nodded. He moved along the leather bench to the far side of the cabin. Almost immediately his body slumped in the seat. There was an ugly gash along his forehead, where he must have struck the panel when the ship lurched. John Kellie noticed it only briefly, because he had grabbed the firing wheel the moment the pilot let it go.

The hard wheel felt oddly familiar under his hands. It had been many years since he had sat behind controls. Could he still pilot? The question hadn't occurred to him back in the salon. Now there wasn't time to think. There were only the fiery ionic cascades against the broad port in front of him, the ship under him, storm-struck and quivering crazily.

HE strove to bring into play long unused muscles and a half-forgotten sense of balance, gripping the wheel so tightly that his new skin was soon ripped and bleeding. But he did not notice his hands. Slowly the feel of the ship was coming to him. The skin on his fingers and hands was not his, but the muscles and nerves inside still belonged to the man who had been called the best pilot between Jove City and Menagon, Mercury.

Kellie fought the old *Empress*, striving to head her into a wild torrent of ions that seemed to come from all sides at once. He forgot every-

thing but himself and the ship. In the whole, wide Universe there was nothing but him and the crotchety *Empress*, whose crazy pulse he was holding under his hands.

Her rockets fired late and each set had a slightly different timing. Kellie wasn't used to them. It needed split-second firing to avert the heaviest blasts before they opened a seam or burst a bulkhead. Suddenly he despaired and cursed himself as a murderer. At least, if he had kept quiet, the men and women aboard would have been saved.

It was not too late to call the steward and tell him it was no go. They could still abandon ship in the dories. But John Kellie couldn't drive the image of the mangled children from his eyes.

The *Empress* was now at the complete mercy of the storm. A whirlpool or a bad cross-current would wreak havoc on her. Yet the maneuver did one thing. It prevented the old lady's own vibrations from helping to tear her to pieces.

In haughty silence the *Empress* rocketed through the darkness in frictionless fall. She gave no further resistance to the buffeting currents and surrendered to every fiery burst.

They'd get through, Kellie thought, if they didn't catch a twister—a supercluster of ions, revolving at incredible speed. He kept his hand on the controls and watched hard. If he saw one coming, he could still try a burst, though it wouldn't do much good.

"Come on, lady," he addressed his unvoiced plea to the ship. "Stay away from twisters and head for calm ether. It's up to you."

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CHRISTMAS ON GANYMEDE

By ISAAC ASIMOV

•

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He had to bring the *Empress* through!

The storm was almost weird in its intensity, one of those disturbances that make a pilot think there's something alive and vicious in space. Kellie thought of a trick he had once tried and got away with. It was dangerous, but it seemed the only thing left.

He rang for the steward.

"Have everyone fasten themselves to the emergency hooks in the cabins," he told the white-jacket. "Do it quick!"

The steward nodded and exited hurriedly. After counting off a full minute on the dial chronometer, Kellie kicked off the rockets and the trembling ship went dead. Only the soft *thrum* of the grav-generators remained.

THE *Empress* obliged. With her skirts tight about her ankles, like the dainty old lady she was, the old ship rode out the storm in fine style. Kellie could have kissed her face plates in affection. Tiredly he kicked down on the slats and the rockets burst out strong as they cleared the tail-end of the storm.

"That was a fine bit of piloting—Kirk."

Kellie didn't have to turn to know who had entered the cabin. He had forgotten about Virhac for the last few hours, but now reality flooded back over him with the unpleasant shock of an icy shower. He kept his face forward to hide its grim bitter-

ness from the ferret.

The long chase was over and he had lost.

"You know," the low voice behind him was saying, "I thought only one man could have brought this ship through the way you did. Pilot by the name of John Kellie. Too bad about him, though. He turned into a criminal and became a convicted fugitive."

There was a pause. Kellie sat deathly still. Then Virhac added in a low, intense tone:

"He was a criminal—a hard, ruthless murderer."

Somehow John Kellie got the curious idea that the man behind him wasn't stating the words. He was asking, pleading to be contradicted. It was an odd thought that Virhac should doubt now, after five years. The knuckles on the firing wheel tightened.

"I knew this fellow Kellie," the pilot said huskily. "He was innocent. He never killed that man. The D.A. railroaded him because it looked like an easy conviction."

"Yes?" Virhac replied slowly. "I remember his story. Kellie said his co-pilot was drunk and raising the devil in the *Orion's* cabin. He said he had to hit him. The man fell and struck his head badly. That was Kellie's story."

"It was true, Virhac."

"But the D.A. found that both men were in love with the same girl, a certain Sue Arnold. He also discovered that the two men had always hated each other."

The hidden, pleading note seemed to beg for the truth, as if Virhac wanted badly to believe. John Kellie answered it earnestly.

"Maybe they didn't like each other, but neither one was a murderer. John Kellie was no murderer, Virhac."

"Was he the type of man who couldn't bear to see a little child die needlessly?"

"I—I think he was," John Kellie said.

In the silence that followed, Kellie almost felt the man behind him swaying. It must have been hard, he knew, for Virhac to admit he was wrong. It would take a real man to change a mind set in one way for five years.

"I'm glad you told me this, Kirk," Virhac said suddenly. The voice was changed now. It was brisk, as if the Service man had put a laborious decision behind him. "I suppose you know Kellie's dead. Yes, he fell from a crag near Venus City while climbing. Too bad, eh? The body hasn't been reclaimed, but there were native witnesses. I'm going home to make a report on it."

The man at the wheel could hardly believe his ears. Was this Virhac speaking? Was he serious? If he was— John Kellie felt cool relief running through him like balm.

"By the way, Kirk," Virhac added, "before Kellie died, he paid a plastic surgeon to disguise him. It was a good job, but he made one mistake. If I were wanted by the Service, Kirk, and I decided to change my identity and pose as—say, a stevedore—the first thing I'd do is make sure the doc didn't leave me with hands like an infant's. Dock-wallopers don't sport rosy palms, Kirk. When a man holds up a match, it's easy to look at his hands."

SILENCE followed, then the sound of footsteps going out of the cabin and down the gangway. Virhac was gone.

Kellie sat dumbly, only one thought in his mind. Virhac had given him back his life and tossed away five years, all in a few seconds. Gratitude and admiration for his enemy welled up in Kellie.

Virhac was hard but honest, a real Service man!

He lifted his hands. So that was why Virhac had become suspicious. But his hands weren't like a newborn's any longer. They were solid mats of blood.

He gripped the wheel again and almost enjoyed the pain.

"Come on, baby," John Kellie whispered to the ship. "We're going to Terra and Sue."

Flattered, the *Empress* kicked out on all her rockets, as if she were an upstart stripling instead of a grand old dame of twenty-five winters.

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BY the Fire-shades of Vulcan, did the old sarge recently feel as though he had made a trip through the nethermost sulphurous regions! A big and husky spaceman of some two hundred-odd pounds tonnage came stalking through the editorial offices trailing clouds of smoke and fairly snorting flames. Under one brawny arm he carried a briefcase which was smoldering like the fungi on the landing fields of Pluto after a rocket ship takes off.

Talk about a trip through old Sol's corona. You space bugs haven't heard anything yet. Wait until you get a glimpse of next issue's lead novel. *The Devil's Planet*, by Manly Wade Wellman, the Devil's head fireman, will warm you up to where you spaceteers along the Eastern Seaboard won't notice the fuel shortage. Yeah, I know, I accidentally let slip a hint on this yarn at the bottom of last issue's department. Sort of got my planets crossed—or got caught with my planets down!

But that was how hot Wellman's "The Devil's Planet" was—it radiated heat across two issues. (We're on a deal with the printers now to use asbestos paper.) Your old sarge had to wear ventilated asbestos gloves while glancing over the manuscript. What kept Manly Wellman from erupting in spontaneous combustion on his way over from New Jersey, I can't fathom. But the painters had to refinish the interior of the elevator he used to come up to our control rooms.

So, prepare yourselves for a red-hot dish. We preserved the manuscript by keeping it under an oil bath in the manner of metallic sodium and cooled Wellman down in the refrigerating unit of the old sarge's flagship before we dared let him essay the journey home. But everything is under control now. Wellman will live—although he fused his typewriter as thoroughly as if he had used a proton ray—and next issue we're off with "The Devil's Planet" under full acceleration.

Constant acceleration would finally crush the hardiest soul. So, knowing you can't stand a solid diet of such raw meat, we are sandwiching in a rollicking Yuletide story which will knock you at least ten degrees out of astrogation reckoning from laughter.

Don't overlook "Christmas on Ganymede" by an up and coming author—Isaac Asimov. And there'll be a couple of other space shorts to round out the issue when it comes time to compute the wordage for the make-up department.

HALL OF FAME CLASSIC

Which brings me to the selection for our galaxy of famous classics. This issue will contain "The Fitzgerald Contraction," by Dr. Miles J. Breuer. No rocket blasts of rhetoric on this yarn; it speaks for itself.

And, listen, you space hounds, how about writing in and voting for your choice of Hall of Fame selections for the months ahead? I'm not offering any prize but if you birds will vote for a short story from our early WONDER files, accompanied by a letter of not more than one hundred words, telling why you selected the said story, I'll prevail on the editor to print the best letter along with the chosen story. Sure, we've done it before. Nice idea, isn't it?

So, come on. Sell me a literary bill of goods aside from your sizzling bellyaches for the hapless vibrating ether. Some of you kiwis must have a complete file of our old numbers. Just make sure you don't ask for a Hall of Fame story we have already run. Would your rockets be red!

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ETHERGRAMS

Suppose we zip open the mail bag and start this month's fireworks with a special announcement of interest to every science-fiction fan everywhere. (No question; statement.)

FOURTH WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION!

By Walter J. Daugherty

Well, print this announcement and call us conventional, Sarge, but here's a STARTLING bit of news that should make your spaceteers sit up and stare like BEMs. We want every kiwi from Vulcan to Pluto to know that the

next WORLD'S SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION will be held in Los Angeles in 1942! Already preparations are under way and things are rolling along smoothly. Every fan here in L.A. is actively co-operative, and even at this early date we can say that this thing is going to be BIG! With all due respect to the New York, Chicago, and Denver conventions, this one is going to be all those in one, with so many extras thrown in that it'll take many a month to get everything lined up. That's why we're starting early.

All readers who plan to attend or support the Convention, should send $1 at once to the Convention Secretary, Paul Freehafer, 349 S. Rampart, Los Angeles. We want to stress the importance of joining early, as your dollar entitles you to a beautiful membership card, special stickers, and other benefits yet to come.

IMPORTANT: **each member is going to be informed personally, from time to time and in a most unique manner, of the further progress of the Convention plans!**

Watch further issues of STARTLING STORIES for more details!

Meanwhile, for a free sample copy of **Pacificonews**, drop a penny postcard to Convention Director Walter J. Daugherty, 6224 Leland Way, Hollywood, Calif.

So, aping Saturn's blasty style, eh? Under the circumstances the old sarge will merely cock a quizzical eye in the direction of Pilot Daugherty. I take it that the Denver Convention was quite a bit of a success. But I still have no first-hand news from you space rats who attended. The old sarge couldn't make it; he was grounded here at the home port, without fuel for his rockets, and busy sweating out the dope for coming issues of STARTLING STORIES. How about a little info on the convention? Did anybody meet any of those sloe-eyed maidens from the Lunar caverns? (Sloe is *not* spelled with a W.)

All right, click on your headphones and stand by for communication. Here comes a message from a guy who knows what he wants.

A REPAIR JOB ON STARTLING
By D. W. Boggs

Dear Sarge: After hitting a torrid pace with the July issue, STARTLING STORIES seems to have slipped back again to the rut with the September number. The Burrough Boys just couldn't follow Jack Williamson. Their "Bottom of the World" might have amounted to something if Jack had been its creator, but the thing was just too incredible the way they did it. The story started out rapidly and, after a series of spark-plug failures, got into high gear. From then on, the thing ripped along so doggone incoherently that I lost interest about the time that Norris lost his bathysphere.

I didn't get a letter sent after the July issue came, so here I want to say that Williamson's "Gateway to Paradise" was one of the finest atf jobs of the year. I list Jack 'way up there, and that yarn arrowed me—bulls-eye! Well, well, so this yarn, like Hamilton's T. W. S. yarn, "Son of Two Worlds," resulted from the Santa Monica Beach story conference in August, 1940! More conferences!

Cover for September: Not bad—in fact, good in comparison with some of Belarski's other covers. The boy apparently has learned about perspective and shading.

Incidentally, I notice many readers were hard put to figure out where in "Gateway to Paradise" Artist Belarski found his inspiration for the July cover. They evidently missed Clayton's tale of his ancestor's experiences during the Dark Star's passing. (P. 32).

As for the other stories for September, "Death From the Stars" is certainly one of the best of the circa 1930 vintage. Many early

[Turn page]

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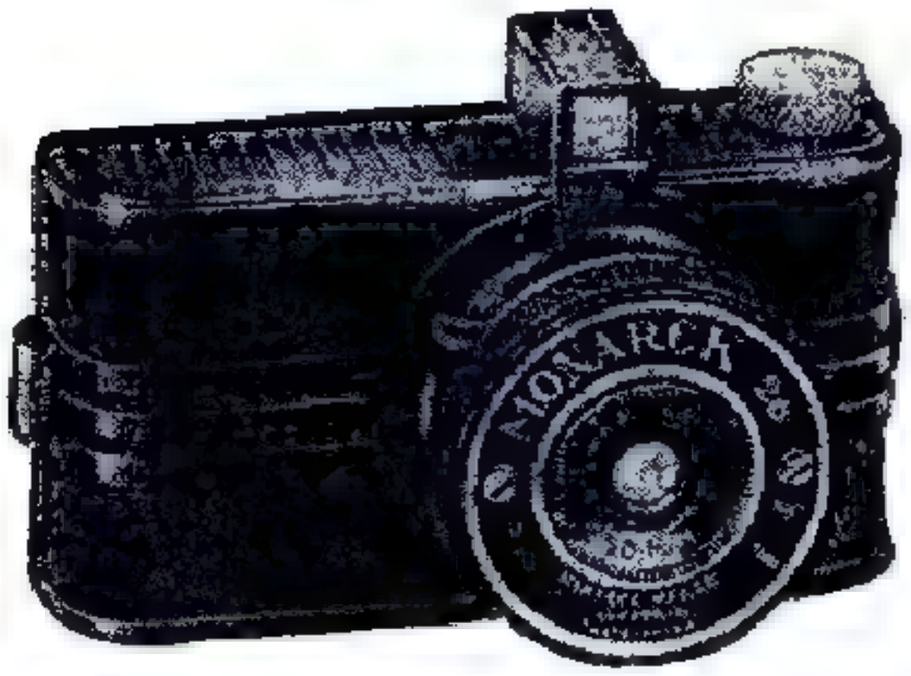

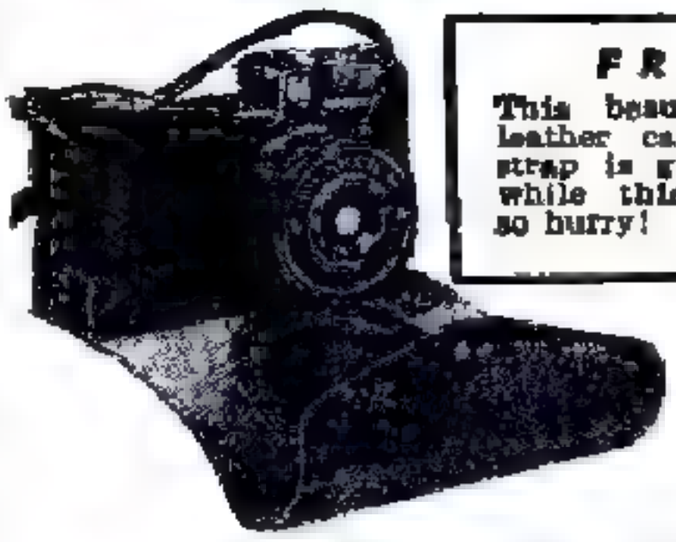

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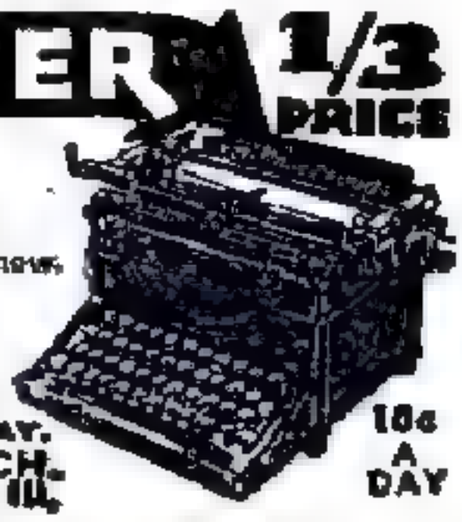

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tales are disappointing as reprints, but July's "Man-Beast of Toree" and his yarn are "classics" worthy of that often misused term.

"No Heroes Wanted." Somewhat more action than most of Williams' stories, but a very acceptable formula yarn.

"Prisoners of Flatland." Another of FBL's recent floppos. This is the worst of his current tales. Phooey!

Departments: Thrills in Science: One of stf's better features. These true tales are often more exciting than the fiction. Crossword Puzzle: Rubbish for the void. S-F Fanzine Review: Boy! are these reviews out of date and out of data! Science Question Box: Usually uninteresting, except perhaps to the questioner.

In conclusion,, I request more tales by Ed Hamilton, Williamson, Binder, and Wellman and fewer by Kuttner and Friend. Also, I hope for book-length novels from other authors as yet unrepresented. Secret wish: A book-lengther from Isaac Asimov!

Heck, I forgot to mention The Ether Vibrates! Like its brothers in the companion magazines, this feature is a stellar letter department, but recently there has been too much emphasis on letters: it's degenerated into an alphabet soup! Down with all societies! The inter-epistle comment is sometimes silly, but I must admit, Sarge, that you can sho nuff sling that lingo! Despite your handle, you are anything but "saturnine" (grave, gloomy, phlegmatic). Where did your cherished "Xeno brew" get its name? An old spacedog once told me that its called "Xeno" because, after one swig, you Xeno evil, hear no evil, speak no evil! In fact, you don't see, hear, speak PERIOD. As an old Xeno lover from 'way back, you should know. Izzat right?—2215 Benjamin Street N. E., Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Simple, isn't it? Peelot Boggs just wants an overhaul job done right out here in space. Rocket jets cleaned and fuel tanks blown while you wait. Not to mention shifting of ballast and trimming of cargo. Now, if somebody will just hand me a broom, I'll sweep out at the same time . . . Anyway, Boggs doesn't bog down in sounding off.

So, listen, kiwi, that's a good letter, and the old sarge isn't saying that some of your views aren't pertinent, but what would suit you exactly would be about ten sizes too large or too small for a lot of other spaceteers. You're telling me the letters are too windy! Tell the other space rats to boil down their bubblings and make their communications more to the point. P.S. Your letter isn't precisely an epigram itself.

Look what comes now!

AN APPLE FOR THE TEACHER

By E. Earl Bielfeldt

Dear Sarge: Bring out the Xeno and some Venusian cheroots, 'cause I want to gab a while.

Everybody wants to know who you are. That's silly. Can't they read? Your name is Sergeant Saturn. You've said so many, many times. Who gives a Martian zentzo about your background? Maybe that's better kept quiet, anyhow, eh, Sarge?

But to get on with what I wanted to tell you. SS is a good book, to put is mildly. My subscription ended with the September issue, but tell that subscription department of yours to keep right on sending STARTLING to me. Money? Oh, sure, look hard and you'll find a money order for ninety cents.

To classify the last six issues would be a hard job, so I'll just put them all in first place and let it go at that. The other two Better Publications SF books, TWS and CAPTAIN FUTURE are also fine. CAPTAIN FUTURE got off to a slow start, but he's picking up fine.

Say, Sarge, are there any pictures of you

around? If not, I've drawn one which I think might look like you. You'll find it, too, with this letter.

Whoa—cut forward rockets. I'm 'way off my orbit. This 'spach is to tell you about your book, SS. Some very fine Hall of Fame stories have been published in the past. I'm a comparitively new fan, so I have never seen any of the old stories.

The crossword puzzle is great fun, keep it. Each is just hard enough to keep a fellow busy; informative, too. Much better than a Science Quiz. I always was a sucker for a crossword puzzle, anyway.

By the way, what has happened to the Guest Editorials? They were good. Put your authors to work writing them again. I guess that they can take time off their stories for a few minutes, can't they?

I'm keeping you up, so I guess I'll go now. Thanks for the Xeno.—Maple and Cherry Lanes, Thornton, Illinois.

Sergeant Saturn

Well, seal my port and call me sherry! Do you snickering space tramps see what I see? So this is the impression Peelot Bielfeldt has of the old sarge! Maybe I'd better call a convention of you birds to appear before me in the control room so you can get a good look at my mug. Great Martian Zoop Flowers! I don't scan through the televisors like this, do I? Or do I? Never mind; don't answer that. Nice caricature, Earl. Keep up your art work.

FIRST BLOOD

By Sylvia Singer

Dear Sarge: This is my first letter to a science-fiction (or any other) mag, and the cause of it all is Jack Williamson, with the best SF story that I've yet read, "Gateway to Paradise." You could really see the world he imagined, with easy life inside the Ring, and the Outside, bleak and terrible. Captain Glenn Clayton was somebody real, alive, somebody that one couldn't help going to bat for. Compared to him, Lieutenant Barry Shane was more of an author's tool, but only as compared. However, the story was supercolossal (boy, am I getting oratorical!).

"Man-Beast of Toree" (the best Hall of Fame yet) was just naturally second, with "Calling of the Harp" a close third. "Crossroads of the Universe" was just ordinary space-filler.

Incidentally, has reader Paul Carter gone space-mad? Tsk-tsk, too bad. Belarski's excellent cover illustrating "Gateway to Paradise" had nothing to do with the story? Or, my mistake, maybe he just can't read. Oh well.

And here's where I join the fight. Please, please, Sarge, we don't want BEMs on the covers (SS hasn't offended so much, but sometimes TWS has). I pick up a mag with one, and feel a thousand eyes boring into me, a thousand fingers pointing accusingly, and

[Turn page]

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"Look what she reads!" echoing in my brain in all the languages of the Universe. Seriously though, I know people who won't look at SF mags because of them. If you must have them, cage 'em in the inside where they won't do so much harm.

But I'm hopping around like a Mercurian skip-frob. Here's the Sept. lineup. I didn't think so much of the Hall of Fame selection. It was quite good, but the others were better. Next, "The Bottom of the World." John C. and Hulbert Burroughs are following in their father's footsteps. Although they're not as good as Edgar Rice at his best—things like "The Land That Time Forgot" (his masterpiece, I think), and the earlier John Carter—I think they are doing better than some of the John Carter and Carson (particularly the former) stuff that is now being published in some mags.

"Prisoners in Flatland" was second. That was excellent. "Death From the Stars" and "No Heroes Wanted" came in about even. As a whole, the Sept. issue wasn't as good as the previous.

And now to close, with a final plea GO MONTHLY, and let's have some more Williamson.—Glen Head, New York.

Well, honey chile, maybe you'd better let the BEMs occasionally haunt the covers. Think what it would look like with, say, Pilot Bielfeldt's conception of the old sarge on it. So this is your first rocket blast, eh? A neat trial flight. Don't neglect to fuel up and heave another broadside sometime. The sarge is sorta partial to gal readers.

THIS SPACETEER'S BEEN DOUBLECROSSED

By Edward C. Connor

Dear Sergeant Saturn: Your editors seem to have a peculiar habit of making a fellow change his opinions. First you give us a very punk story or so, and at the first opportunity say, "Ha! ha! Just wait! Wait until next time! We've got something good!"

When you recently made a like statement regarding Oscar J. Friend's novel "Water World," I knew how things would turn out.

But—what's this?—I find myself forced to make the following statement: "Water World" is a definite hit!!! It is a smasheroo! A whizbang! In fact—I have been doublecrossed! What has Friend done?—929 Butler St., Peoria, Illinois.

And here we are again. One man's meat is another man's poison. Who said that was a cliché? We still eat, don't we—when we can get it. And I've run into the darnedest variety of poisons kicking about the Solar System. It all boils down to the simple fact that some folks like this and other folks like that. You birds would have the old sarge space-dizzy if it weren't for one thing. Cut your blasts and listen.

Confidentially, I'm glad to air your frank opinions. But personally I like 'em all. So, evidently, does Peelot Sealover.

SPACE LINER FICTION

By Art Sealover

Dear Sarg.: I am going to ask a question about this bi-monthly publishing of the best sf mag on the market today. WHY, WHY, WHY, WHY not monthly?

I am just about to start "Sojarr of Titan," and I hope it is as good as "A Yank at Valhalla." That was a humdinger." The City of Singing Flame," was awful.

I have been a reader of STARTLING STORIES for over a year now and have only a good report to make (that is almost all of the time), but just keep up the good work, and I hope when we are able to take a space ship to Mars, or the Moon, I will be able to take along a copy of STARTLING STORIES

and enjoy myself on my trip through space.—137 Pine Street, Zanesville, Ohio.

Maybe you space rats don't stop to realize it, but Kive Sealover has the right idea. A voyage through space—after the initial excitement of blasting off and setting up the astrogation chart—is, barring accidents, just about as dull an interval as you can imagine. That is, unless you can start a few first-class fights. Or maybe swizzle a jug of Xeno. And speaking of Xeno, read this snappy report.

A CRACK AT BELARSKI

By Frank Shaney

Dear Sarge: Pass around the Xeno jug, Sarge! The September issue was a honey. After struggling past the cover and nine pages of advertisement, I found the best issue of the past nine months.

Speaking of the cover, here's an atom bomb you can put under Belarski. The scene is supposed to illustrate "The Bottom of the World," but far be it from me to find any connection. They must be on the surface of the Earth, since the humans are not wearing pressure suits, but then how did the seamen get there? They aren't wearing suits, either. By the way, those seamen look like zombies returning from fight with a Plutonian wildcat. How did the girl get there? And who is the green-faced gent with the pointed ears in the background?

The Burroughs boys really did a swell job on the novel. John can really swing a wicked pen on those illustrations, too. He's better than some of your staff artists I could mention. The ones on pages fifteen and thirty-one

[Turn page]

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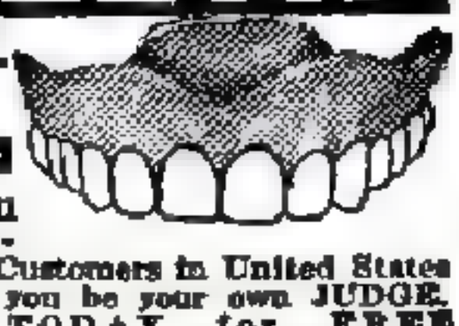

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are good examples. I like full-page illustrations. Can't we have some more?

"Prisoners in Flatland" was sort of mediocre. Long has done better than that.

"Death from the Stars" is one to remember.

"No Heroes Wanted" was a fast-moving short story. It was okay.

I see that the next issue features "The Gods Hate Kansas." Haven't the authors any pity in their hearts? This old Earth has been through just about everything from freezing to exploding. The time is ripe for an adventure story like "The Three Planeteers" and "A Million Years to Conquer." I say leave Earth alone for a while. It's taken an awful beating in the last three issues. Let Binder bring back Anton Yorks. (What ever happened to him? The last I heard, he was in another dimension.) Or let Hamilton bring over Captain Future for a visit.

The alphabet war over BEMs is reaching gigantic proportions and may become too much for the old Sarge to handle. Why not rig up a score board and put the thing to a vote? I hereby cast my vote to exterminate all BEMs and let the carcasses fall where they may.

Well, I guess that's all, Sarge.

Yours 'till your Xeno jug gets empty.—905 E. Elm Street, New Albany, Indiana.

So—getting back to my reference to Xeno—you really want to know what makes Artist Belarski draw and paint in the little men you don't think are there, do you? Well, Belarski tippled a shot from my Xeno jug when I wasn't looking and he's been running on atomic energy ever since. But you'd better look close for scenes illustrated by the cover paintings. They are generally there. Accurate enough, too, if you allow for a little artistic license and concede the symbolic, parabolic, allegoric and paregoric motif. Anyway, that's enough out of you, Brother Shaney.

And who was it running the thermo-coupled rheostat up to a thousand B.T.U.'s in my space suit over lengthy letters in this rocky rocket domain of mine? Take a reading of this gauge, will you, you space monkey?

THE SPACE QUIZ-KID

By Paul Cox

Dear Sarge: I have just bought the September issue of STARTLING STORIES so have not yet read it, but that cover is punk. I have never seen but one cover by Mister Belarski that I liked—back in 1935. The ideal cover would be some dark space scene such as an asteriod floating in dark space or a comet with a background of black.

Drop the scientific crossword puzzle and one short story and fill in with THE ETHER VIBRATES. Letters are much more interesting than most of the short stories (not my letter, of course).

Sarge, why don't you answer the letters? I don't mean personal correspondence, but under the letters that you print. You completely ignore most of the questions put to you. I am going to ask some of the questions that many have asked, but received no answer. Please answer them.

1. How may I get back issues? Are the first three issues still available?
2. Who is the editor of SS, TWS and CF?
3. Why did TWS go bi-monthly?
4. If I wish to join the Science Fiction League how may I do so without injuring the magazine?
5. Why don't you use Bok in your magazine?—3401 6thAve., Columbus, Georgia.

As I live and endeavor to breathe with asteroids! This kiwi wants a longer department. And he is calling the old sarge down, when all the time I thought I was going to great length to answer appropriately every query printed in this quarter of space which required an answer. The old

sarge has felt at times as gabby as a couple of Plutonian chipmunks at a Venusian baboon house-party. And now—this!

Answering your questions in numerical sequence, Peelot Cox: One, we cannot undertake to supply back numbers. But frequently I see ads anent such things in the fan mags. Two, our science magazines are handled by a small group of specialists on our busy staff. You can always hit the nail on the head by communicating with Leo Margulies, Editorial Director of this and our companion magazines. Three, do you really want to know? Instead, suppose you boost the idea of more fans buying magazines rather than trading them around and mooching a few pages at a time at the newsstands. STARTLING STORIES is planned to alternate with THRILLING WONDER STORIES, which appears in the months when SS does not. Four, you have me here, pal. I'm stuck on this one with frozen and fused rocket tubes. Perhaps if you'll send three soap wrappers and an affidavit to the fact that you personally used the soap—or a reasonable facsimile thereof—we can complete the last line of the jinglet for you. And five, we have used Bok's work. We may again. Artists, like authors and readers, drift in and drift out. Derelicts of space, yeah. Are you answered?

Here comes another squawk.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

By Bill Macfarlane, Jr.

Dear Sarge: I intend to show you two nasty things about S.S., which won't stop bothering

[*Turn page*]

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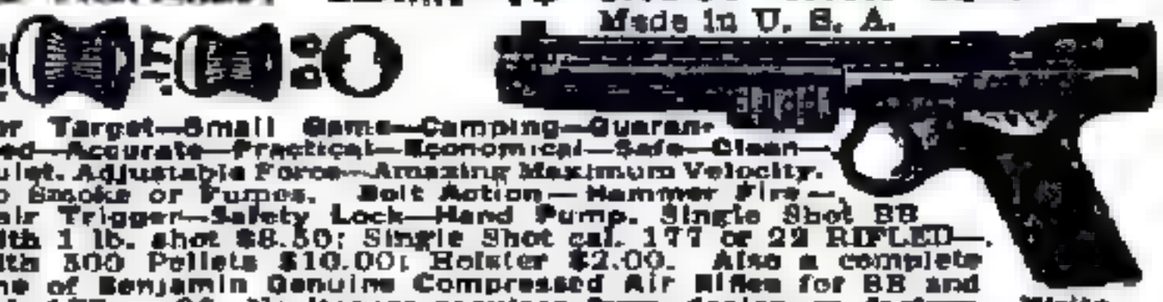

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The first one is the cover on our dear magazine, S.S. Why don't you put to use Scientific Illustrations in or out of stories in the mag. The only good ones are the issues of Mar. 1940, Jan. 1940, and Nov. 1939, and a few others. Cut out the Tarzan, monsters and Flash Gordon illustrations. Please use ideas at least a little more scientific, even a wee bit would do. What's wrong with a space ship in flight, crashing, or in combat, or a laboratory scene with electrical gadgets, and what's wrong with a time machine in action (not like Finlay's screwy sketch) and least of all a planet!

Ah! Now Rudy may be a good draftsman and tone arranger, but his choice and ideas of illustrations, well—gently tell him to improve or scram!

Now for the second. Most of your stories are hardly science fiction at all, but merely adventure yarns, such as "The Bottom of the World," "Sojarr of Titan" and "Twice in Time." "When New York Vanished," "The Three Planeteers," "The Fortress of Utopia" are actually science fiction. So what do you say to a good heavy science yarn, such as time travel and space legions?

Ah, Ha! Your short stories are O.K. So is the "Hall of Fame." How about bringing "The Moon Conquerors," by R. H. Romans, into this hall of fame, too?

Now for a blast into the money box: "How about trimed edges?"

The feul of this pen just exploded!—409 S. 2nd Ave., Mt. Vernon, N. Y.

Okay, Peelot MacFarlane, Jr., you've had your say. Now take a tip from the old sarge who has seen many a kiwi come and go. Decide upon one name, preferably your own, and do all your corresponding with the old space dog under the same by-line. Catch on?

To give the final blast to rockets before we start free-wheeling in space, here's a hot message from an indefatigable fan.

KATIE WARMS UP

By Katherine Baum

Dear Sarge: All right, so you can Wesso and Bergey for an issue, and what do you do? Stuff Orban's monstrosities down our respective throats. Really, Sarge those were the worst pics ever seen in STARTLING, and to add insult to injury you give us a cover full of Martian Greenies or whatever they are. For shame! I liked the black lettering; quite distinctive.

Friend's story was very well done. His dialogue is about the best of current writers. I believe that Friend and DeCamp handle dialogue better than any STF author, with the sole exception of Weinbaum who was always at his best when doing the dialogue; witness THE NEW ADAM. Why can writers (STF) get women into their stories without making them as insipid as a pack mule? That chalks up another score for DeCamp and Weinbaum.

I'd like to see another humorous tale by Friend of the type like "Kid from Mars." Hamilton does rather well in the humorous vein, too. Jack Williamson's story sounds good; hope Finlay's illustrations grace it.

Oh, by the way, did you notice that each person on the cover resembles some movie star? Ye damsel in distress is the image of Rita Johnson, and the sinewy hero looks like crooner Kenny Baker. The guy tied to the wall is the counterpart of Larry Crabbe, and that Greenie in pain is a repulsive combination of Karloff, Lugosi, and Colonna.

We are going to miss Anderson's witty, or should I say, brilliant letters. Too much wordage, so that's about all.

P.S. All fans in Pgh. crawl out of your holes and get into the swing of things, by joining the Pgh. branch of the Science Fiction League for heap fun and frolic. Come on, let's hear from ya. Regular meetings being held. Phone me at FA 5262 for details.—1243 Juniata St., N. S., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Thanks, Bonnie Kate, that's a pretty good kick in the pants to end this month's

department on. But listen, gal, pull your punches just a wee bit. The old sarge has to censor your spaceman lingo a trifle before putting you on the ether.

And what are the rest of you space birds grinning at? If you don't know it, everything has to be edited before it can go down to the printers. Yeah, even fan letters. Many a literary reputation has been salvaged in the old sarge's control room. What's that? Well, you should see your own letters before I get the blue pencil to working.

While we're on this course, suppose I mention that it would be a lot easier on old Saturn if you space apes would type your letters, double-spaced, on one side of the paper only. And don't forget to sign them if you want them printed.

All right. Close and seal ports. All aboard for the home port. If we don't blow a head gasket, I'll ride herd on you spacebugs next issue.

—SERGEANT SATURN,
The Old Space Dog

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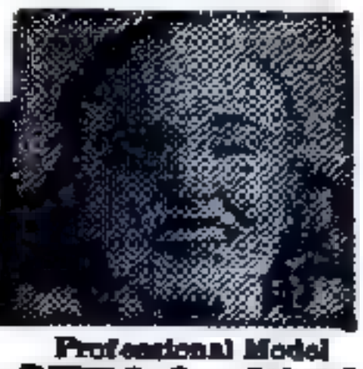

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REVIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

FANTASY-TIMES, 137-07 32nd Avenue, Flushing, N. Y. James V. Taurasi, editor. Sam Moskowitz and Alex Osheroff, associate editors.

First issue of a new monthly fan mag, a companion to COSMIC TALES. Looks as though it will be quite neway and authentic. Good luck, boys.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, N. Y. Julius Unger, editor.

You are coming along. You might cut your stencils a bit sharper. And if you are going to carry the word "Illustrated" in your title, better use some illustrations. (April 19, 1941, is the latest copy to come to my desk.)

FMZ DIGEST, 1426 W. 38th St., Los Angeles, Cal. Editor, Arthur Louis Joquel, 2nd.

Nice June number. Quite a June-bug on the back page, too. Good paper, neat format.

THE CFS REVIEW, 1258 Race St., Denver, Colo. Editors, Lew B. Martin, Roy V. Hunt, and Olon F. Wiggins.

Number four of a new fan mag. Neat and not gaudy. The July issue is mainly of interest to Colorado fans. Pre-convention news. Keep it growing.

FANTASY NEWS (Weekly) 31-51 41st St., Long Island City, N. Y. William S. Sykora, editor. Jimmy Taurasi, Sam Moskowitz, Mario Racic, Jr., associates.

As near a professional-looking sheet as anything in the field. You could pack a whale of a lot of news in this organ—if you can garner it. Too bad it isn't eight sheets instead of two. Note: Two "Voice of Fandom" heads in July 28 issue.

FANART, 2409 Santee Ave., Columbia, S. C. Editor, Henry Jenkins, Jr. Publisher, Hugh Wm. Robinson.

Volume One, Number One of a new fan publication. Devoted mostly to fantastic and science fiction art. A wow! Nice going, fellows. This mag is to be a bi-monthly and is affiliated with DIXIE PRESS. Success to it!

POLARIS, Box 6475, Metro Station, Los Angeles, Cal. Editor, Paul Freehafer.

The June, 1941, issue is the latest at hand. Fiction, articles, poem, and editorial department. Nice job. Could have a larger news department.

SPACEWAYS, 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. Editor, Harry Warner, Jr. Associate Editor, James S. Avery.

Quite a formidable fan mag of some twenty-two pages, plus a front and back cover of heavy orange-colored paper. This mag is evolving into a regular magazine. Good work.

ULTRA, 274 Edgecliff Rd., Woollahra, Sydney, NSW, Australia. Editor, Eric F. Russell. Associate Editors, Edward H. Russell and Ralph A. Smith.

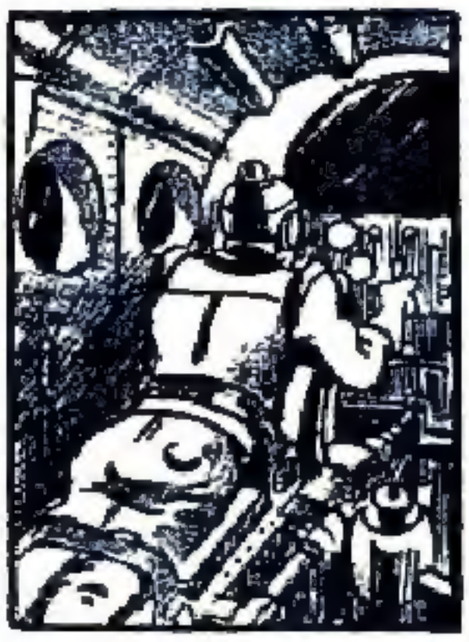
A compact package from Australia. Twenty pages, too. Neat stunt (but expensive) of

using photo prints for art illustrations on page 12. At least, it comes under the heading of the art department, being snapshots of groups who attended the second Sydney Science Fiction Conference. Nice job with front and back covers of pale blue, illustrated.

Which catches all the new fan magazines that have come to the editor's desk. If you fans want your mags mentioned or reviewed by STARTLING STORIES be sure to send us the current issues so we can keep pace with you. Perhaps we will find space and time to compile a list of all fan magazines being published in the world for you. But you'll have to help on this job. And a special note to all of you: Cram all worthwhile news items into each of your issues. It helps the other fellow on the other side of the continent or of the world to get a clearer picture of things. You can all stand improvement of format. Good luck to you all!

—THE EDITOR.

Coming Next Issue



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30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.50	1.15
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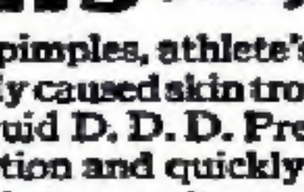

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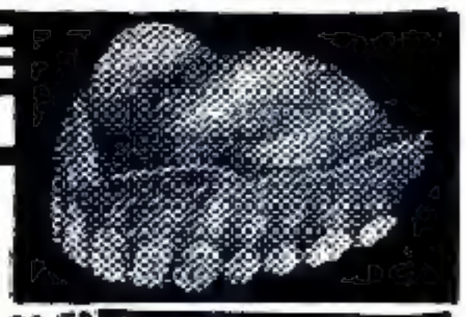

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